

THE EVOLUTION OF AIDS AS SUBJECT MATTER
IN SELECT AMERICAN DRAMAS
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Dramatic works from America with AIDS as subject matter have evolved over the past twenty years. In the early 1980s, dramas like Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, William Hoffman's As Is, and Robert Chesley's Night Sweat educated primarily homosexual men about AIDS, its causes, and its effects on the gay community while combating the dominant discourse promoted by the media, government, and medical establishments that AIDS was either unimportant because it affected primarily the homosexual population or because it was attributed to lack of personal responsibility.

By the mid-eighties and early nineties, playwrights Terrence McNally (Love! Valour! Compassion!) and Paul Rudnick (Jeffrey) concentrated on relationships between sero-discordant homosexual couples. McNally's "Andre's Mother" and Lips Together, Teeth Apart explored how families and friends face the loss of a loved one to AIDS.

Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning Angels in America epic represents living beyond AIDS as a powerful force. Without change and progress, Angels warns, life stagnates.

Angels also introduces the powerful drugs that help alleviate the symptoms of AIDS. AIDS is the centerpiece of the epic, and AIDS and homosexuality are inextricably blended in the play.

Rent, the Pulitzer Prize-winning musical by Jonathan Larson, features characters from an assortment of ethnic and social backgrounds - including heterosexuals, homosexuals, bi-sexuals, some with AIDS, some AIDS-free, some drug users - all living through the diverse troubles visited upon them at the turn of the millennium in the East Village of New York City. AIDS is not treated as "special," nor are people with AIDS pandered to. Instead, the characters take what life gives them, and they live fully, because there is "no day but today" ("Finale"). Rent's audiences are as varied as the American population, because it portrays metaphorically what so many Americans face daily - not AIDS *per se*, but other difficult life problems, including self-alienation. As such, Rent defies the dominant discourse because the community portrayed in Rent is the American community.

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CHAPTER 1

AIDS, AMERICAN DRAMA, AND THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. . . . The scarlet stains upon the body . . . were the pest ban which shut the victim out from the sympathy of his fellow-men. . . . But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends . . . and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. . . . A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. The wall had gates of iron. The courtiers brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. . . . With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The Prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."
- Edgar Allan Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death"

In the middle of Act 1 of Jonathan Larson's 1996 Broadway smash-hit musical Rent, two homosexual characters with AIDS - Tom Collins, an African-American professor of "computer age philosophy," and Angel Dumott Schunard, an Hispanic cross-dresser - attend an AIDS support group meeting. Several people attend the meeting, including lead character Mark Cohen, an amateur documentary film maker who is heterosexual and AIDS-free. As each person begins to

introduce him or herself, Mark awkwardly interrupts; when he is asked to give his name, Mark bumblingly replies, "Oh - I'm not -/ I'm just here to -/ I don't have -/ I'm here with -/ Um - Mark/ Mark - I'm Mark" ("Life Support"). Mark is obviously uncomfortable with the possibility that someone might think he has AIDS, and in fact, throughout the rest of the play, Mark Cohen compassionately objectifies the persons with AIDS, observing them from behind the safety of his 8mm movie camera. The support group scene ends with Mark leaving the group while the members sing in a slow, somber harmony "Will I lose my dignity/ Will someone care/ Will I wake tomorrow/ From this nightmare?" ("Will I").

Certainly this brief scene from Rent is a fictionalized account of an AIDS support group meeting, but Mark's discomfort dramatizes the very real misconception that Americans have about AIDS: that it is a "homosexual disease," and that if people think Mark has AIDS, then they will likely conclude that he is also homosexual, or at least that he is at "high risk." Later in the play, we learn that Mark's heterosexual roommate, Roger Davis, contracted AIDS from his girlfriend who has committed suicide. Mark's friends Tom and Angel also have AIDS.

Rent presents the state of AIDS at the end of the millennium. AIDS affects the play's major and minor

characters from all backgrounds: black, white, Hispanic, male, female, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, educated, uneducated, IV drug users, poor, and wealthy. But this vast array of characters with AIDS represents a significant change in the way American dramatists have presented AIDS on stage. The plays that introduced AIDS to the American stage, including Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart (1985) and William M. Hoffman's As Is (1988), featured homosexual men as the only persons with AIDS (PWAs), and these plays work as types of problem plays, introducing the theatrical world to the AIDS plague. The first play that features AIDS as subject matter, Robert Chesley's 1984 Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts, is set in an S&M/suicide fantasy club; AIDS is another means to bring death, and it works to shock the audience. Subsequent plays continue the stereotype of AIDS as a gay affliction. Terrence McNally, one of Broadway's most prolific playwrights, wrote several plays in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s that featured families coping with the death of their homosexual sons and brothers, including "Andre's Mother" (1988) and Lips Together, Teeth Apart (1991).

McNally's Love! Valour! Compassion! (1994), like Paul Rudnick's 1992 play Jeffrey, represents a dramatic change in the perception of the afflicted characters. Although the

characters affected by AIDS are still homosexual men, these men live with, through, and beyond the syndrome by falling in love and living out their lives. The most famous AIDS dramas - Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches (1993) and Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika (1996) - play out famed attorney Roy Cohn's fierce denial of his affliction with AIDS and of his sexual orientation. This next step in the evolution of AIDS as subject matter in American drama moves the syndrome out of the homosexual subculture and into the mainstream, and it leads the way to Jonathan Larson's Rent. Rent explores the effect of AIDS and HIV on all types of people.

To suggest that the evolution of AIDS as subject matter for American dramatists is lockstep - from the very specific, overtly and exclusively homosexual PWAs of The Normal Heart to the multicultural population with the syndrome in Rent - is simplistic. One play did not necessarily lead to the next, then to the next. Instead, the handling of AIDS in these plays evolved as the American perception of AIDS has evolved.

How has AIDS changed in the eyes of America? To answer this question, we must identify the public's first impression of the syndrome, as defined by medical,

governmental, and social organizations. We must also understand how the people affected by the syndrome have been and are identified by the American public. Finally, we must understand that performance art has been and is a formidable force of social change, and plays with AIDS as subject matter have evolved from featuring exclusively affected homosexual men to featuring all types of people.

First Impressions

Openly gay journalist Randy Shilts, author of And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic, suggests that the history of the AIDS epidemic can be divided into two parts, separated by the 1985 announcement that actor Rock Hudson had AIDS:

Rock Hudson riveted America's attention upon this deadly new threat for the first time, and his diagnosis became a demarcation that would separate the history of America before AIDS from the history that came after. (xxi)

Shilts is suggesting that before Rock Hudson's announcement that he had AIDS, media coverage about the syndrome was sparse. Gay and AIDS organizations were relieved, because a nationally recognized, masculine figure had contracted AIDS. These groups went so far as to claim that Hudson had acquired the syndrome from a blood transfusion he had

undergone a few years earlier (Kistenberg 10). Hudson's sexual orientation had been the subject of the Hollywood rumor mill for years. When his homosexuality became public knowledge - Hudson's gender orientation was discussed on the front page of virtually every newspaper in America on Sunday, July 28, 1985 - AIDS was once again reaffirmed as a "homosexual disease" by the public at large (Shilts 578).

At the time of this writing, AIDS is considered a "gay disease," although technically it is neither. Worldwide, AIDS affects far more heterosexuals than homosexuals, as virtually any nightly newscast will verify. Also, AIDS is not a disease; the affliction is called "acquired immune deficiency **syndrome**," and medically a syndrome is not a disease. Also, people do not die of AIDS *per se*; rather, people die of complications from AIDS. A depressed immune system allows sometimes innocuous diseases and benign ailments, along with malignancies, to grow unchecked, thereby resulting in death.¹

The set of Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, as well as the walls of the Public Theater during the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1985, was covered with the graffiti of AIDS activism: "12,062 AND COUNTING" on August 1, 1985; "EPIDEMIC OFFICIALLY DECLARED JUNE 5, 1981"; the number of cases in children, gays, and straights; an announcement by

Dr. Robert Gallo in the London Observer that "TWO MILLION AMERICANS ARE INFECTED - ALMOST 10 TIMES THE OFFICIAL ESTIMATES"; Washington's announcement of the discovery of the virus in April 1984 (over a year after France announced the discovery in January 1983); and other shocking statistics of the epidemic (Kramer 19-22).

Kramer uses these facts and figures to heighten audiences' awareness that the fight against AIDS has taken a back seat to most other ailments. Notable in the comparisons are the scant seven articles published by the New York Times about AIDS during the first nineteen months since its discovery, with almost one thousand cases reported, as opposed to the fifty-four articles, including four front page articles, printed in the Times during the three months of the Tylenol poisoning scare in 1982, which produced a total of seven cases (Kramer 20-21).

Kramer's AIDS graffiti presents a history of the affliction, but this history is largely social and political rather than medical. The most politically significant element of AIDS is that it occurs most often in the United States in an already stigmatized population, homosexual males:

Even though AIDS is in no intrinsic sense "a gay disease," the fact that, at least in the Western

World, it has been primarily experienced by male homosexuals has shaped the entire discourse surrounding the disease. (Altman, Dennis AIDS 21)

There is no question that in the early 1980s, AIDS and male homosexuality were linked in the American public's mind. The first article discussing the newly discovered ailment was printed in the New York Times on July 3, 1981, with the headline "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals." Since this article's publication, a relationship between AIDS and homosexuals has been almost irreversibly forged. According to Sander Gilman, "GRID" (gay-related immune deficiency) was a popular appellation for the syndrome in January of 1982, until the term "AIDS" (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) officially described what was previously considered an STD (sexually transmitted disease) acquired mostly by promiscuous homosexual men (89). The entire future discourse about AIDS was affected, because AIDS in America was first identified with homosexual men (Altman, Dennis AIDS 33).

AIDS was discovered in people other than homosexuals in 1982, also. Besides homosexuals, AIDS occurred with some regularity in heroin addicts, Haitians, and hemophiliacs; these groups together became known as the "four H's," and were identified as "at risk" for AIDS (Kistenberg 8). Had the syndrome been discovered in the three other "H's" before

it was discovered in homosexuals, and had the press emphasized the discovery in the other groups, the story of AIDS may have been written differently.

Before it was widely known that AIDS affected people other than homosexuals, Reverend Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, along with other ultraconservative groups, found it to be "God's judgment against a society that does not live by His rules" (qtd. in Crimp 8), and an editorial in the Southern Medical Journal asserted, "Might we be witnessing, in fact, in the form of a modern communicable disorder, a fulfillment of St. Paul's pronouncement: 'the due penalty of their [presumably homosexuals'] error'?" (qtd. in Altman, Dennis AIDS 13). After it was discovered that other groups acquired the syndrome, the term "innocent victim" evolved as a means of differentiating between "those who were infected through chosen behaviors (e.g., anal sex and IV drug use)," those infected through blood transfusions and babies infected from their mothers (Kistenberg 8). Therefore, if homosexuality is a defining attribute of AIDS in the American public's mind, then heterosexuals who acquire the syndrome must be "innocent victims" and homosexual men must become the ones to blame for the new plague. The stigmatized group becomes doubly stigmatized.

Although people other than homosexual males are "at

risk" of contracting AIDS, and in spite of the fact that world-wide AIDS affects significantly more heterosexuals than homosexuals, it is still thought of as a "gay disease." The medical community, the government, and the media first presented to the world AIDS as a disease that primarily affects homosexuals (Kistenberg 9), and debunking this "first impression" has become a politically charged battle of definitions. Cindy Patton draws the lines between the two primary sides:

There is a common belief that AIDS information giving is politically neutral, but both the progressive AIDS activists and the right wing mean different things when they assert the same facts. Fact-based language is used both by the right, which views mainstream AIDS education as a gay plot, and by liberals who want to depoliticize AIDS. But we can't simply depoliticize AIDS by using neutral sounding terms. In fact, in the current landscape, we cannot depoliticize AIDS at all. (114)

The official, dominant discourse that came from the medical establishment, the government, and the media constructed AIDS, in order of significance to America, as first a homosexual affliction, then a sexually transmitted

disease. AIDS is also an affliction of IV drug users, and finally, it is a scientific/medical problem (Kistenberg 10).

Gay Liberation, Stonewall, and AIDS

The greatest number of AIDS cases in America were found in homosexual men, and "the visibility and sexual freedom gays experienced after the Stonewall riot contributed to their being blamed for the spread of AIDS" (Kistenberg 10).

The modern gay movement began to emerge in the period between 1968 and 1971, when homosexuals began demanding total acceptance instead of accepting meager tolerance for their lives, and their demand was backed by a new militance. The demonstrations that resulted from police invading the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, on June 27, 1969, are generally regarded as the key event in the birth of this new movement² (Altman, Dennis Homosexualization 113). Bar raids, according to Barry Adam, "were an American institution - a police rite to 'manage' the powerless and disrespectable" (75), but unlike other bar raids, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn rebelled. Drag queens and bar boys, dykes and lipstick lesbians attacked the police with campy jeers and comments, then threw stones, coins, and even parking meters. At the end of the weekend, the Stonewall Inn had been burned, but gay liberation had

been born. The Stonewall riots prompted the Matachine Action Committee³ to distribute a flyer on June 29, 1969, that called for organized resistance⁴ (75-76). As a result, the Gay Liberation Front and other gay liberation organizations were established on college campuses across America (Kistenberg 10). These groups were and continue to be advocates for the homosexual/lesbian population, working to legitimize same-sex relationships throughout the world.

Along with the political freedom and strength that the Stonewall riots ultimately brought also came more sexual freedom. Although there is no quantitative evidence that the riots led directly to sexual liberation,

it is possible to identify three major areas of change: the expansion of homosexual bath-houses and sex clubs . . . the emergence of sexually transmitted parasites as a major homosexual health problem . . . and a boom in "recreational drugs" . . . in conjunction with what came to be known as "fast-lane sex." (Altman, Dennis AIDS 14)

Sex became a means of empowerment to homosexual men. After decades of secret rendezvous and hidden door bars that were subject to frequent police raids, the explosive 1970s allowed homosexuals to express freely their sexuality. They

were able to have interpersonal relationships as homosexual men without having to hide their orientation. Sex became "an agent of communion, replacing often a hostile family It represents an ecstatic break with years of glances and guises, the furtive past [they] left behind" (qtd. in Altman, Dennis AIDS 7).

Homosexuality and the Rare Cancer

The new attention to homosexuality that the Stonewall incident had initiated - a bright spotlight of focus on gays both politically and socially - ironically also became a spotlight on homosexuals afflicted with AIDS. The synchronous rise of gay rights and the new-found sexual freedom that were borne of the Stonewall riots in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s are frequently used to explain the visibility and spread of AIDS among homosexuals (Kistenberg 11). Although early in the epidemic it was discovered that AIDS affected other groups as well as homosexual men, the majority of research done on the syndrome was on "known homosexuals," and the majority of press about the syndrome called it a "homosexual disease." This is for several reasons, the primary one being that the majority of people falling ill were homosexual men. Researchers began to study homosexuals to determine what specific practices, if any, could be the cause of the new

ailment. Many theories were offered, but the most often pursued in research was a connection between AIDS and drug use. An early study by the Centers of Disease Control of over four hundred homosexual men found that 86 percent of them used poppers - amyl and butyl nitrites - and most had used drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines, LSD, and heroin (Duesberg 267). While many homosexual men were indeed drug users, the list of possible causes for AIDS narrowed quickly to the most pervasive drug in the gay community, poppers.

The poppers craze was in full force by the 1970s, after homosexuals discovered the aphrodisiac effects of the drug in the 1960s. Poppers relax the anal sphincter, help maintain a firm erection, and intensify the orgasm; it became a rather popular sex drug in the liberated disco era. (Duesberg 270). When it realized the universal popularity of poppers in the homosexual community, the CDC identified this drug as a possible explanation of the AIDS epidemic; however, the CDC was wrong. In its search for the answer, the CDC limited its research along these lines to finding a contaminated or "bad batch" of nitrites (Duesberg 272). Although poppers have since been proven to induce Kaposi's sarcoma, one of many AIDS-related diseases, the sarcoma was also found frequently in patients who used poppers but were AIDS and HIV free (Duesberg 271).

The search for a cause of AIDS was renewed.

Immediately, in both research and the media, a connection between AIDS and homosexual promiscuity was made. The first article about the new syndrome appeared in the New York Times on July 1983, including a remark that "according to Dr. Friedman-Kien the reporting doctors said that most cases had involved homosexual men who have had multiple and frequent sexual encounters with different partners" (Altman, Lawrence 20A). If this comment had been qualified to suggest that promiscuity was dangerous because it significantly increased the exposure to dangerous organisms, the connection would have been valid; however, both the press and the medical establishment seized upon the idea that promiscuity itself, without qualification, was the cause of the ailment (Altman, Dennis AIDS 34). In August 1983, Charles Krauthammer wrote in the New Republic,

The one empirical fact we know about AIDS is that it is associated with promiscuity. AIDS victims have more than twice as many sexual partners as healthy homosexuals. (qtd. in Altman, Dennis AIDS 34)

With promiscuity propagated as the cause of AIDS and not just a risk factor, people concluded that people with AIDS must have been promiscuous, and people who were not

promiscuous could not contract AIDS (Altman, Dennis AIDS 34).

Such a blind leap of logic caused researchers of the ailment a variety of new problems. Once promiscuity was suggested as a cause of the syndrome, researchers were often unable to establish links between sexual activity and infection in individuals, because people were more likely to shade the truth of their sexual activity. Furthermore, the sociology of male homosexual behavior was misunderstood. Researchers were less likely to understand that long-term, committed homosexual couples were not always monogamous, and that often partners were quite sexually active outside the relationship. Even more importantly, researchers neglected to consider the possibility that homosexual men became involved in committed partnerships at all; instead, they labored under the misunderstanding that all homosexuals were, as Dennis Altman calls them, "full-time sexual athletes" (AIDS 34).

Another irony that focused the AIDS crisis in the homosexual community is the relative financial stability of homosexual men in comparison to the other "at risk" groups. AIDS in hemophiliacs was still a fairly uncommon occurrence—it was not until December 1982 that the first case of AIDS by blood transfusion, the most common means of

infection of hemophiliacs, was reported (Altman, Dennis AIDS 37). IV drug users were and still are a rather difficult group to study for two reasons. IV drug use is a classless practice; although most IV drug users are poor, users span all classes. Also, as mentioned before, drug use was very much part of the "fast lane" homosexual underworld, and determining if the infection came from promiscuous sex or drug use was virtually impossible. Haitians, the fourth "at risk" group, also tended to be poorer and had little access to the medical community. Furthermore, some of both Haitians and IV drug users had had homosexual experiences, so the CDC automatically classified them as homosexual or bisexual, thereby lowering the percentage of people infected with AIDS due to nationality and drug use. Accusations of racism and homophobia further complicated the record-keeping (Altman, Dennis AIDS 37).

Because the infected homosexual men enjoyed relative wealth in comparison to other "at risk" groups, they were more likely to seek medical attention when they became ill (Altman, Dennis AIDS 39). These men were the first cases of AIDS seen by the medical community, and the diagnosticians considered the "deviant" behavior of these men in their hypotheses.

Homosexuals and the medical establishment have been at odds ever since homosexuality as a concept was officially recognized. In 1869, a Hungarian doctor named Kartbeny coined the term "homosexual," when the medical profession in the Western world first began to become powerful because of its ability to name and codify functions of the human body. As a result, governments began to use medical classification as a means of controlling behaviors they or religious institutions deemed unsavory. Sexuality was closely monitored and attempts to control all types of "immoral" sexual behavior by legislation were not uncommon; the medical profession in turn attempted to control questionable sexuality by trying to "cure" homosexuality. The force of the gay liberation movement that resulted from the Stonewall incident ultimately forced the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in 1973, a huge victory for the gay community. However, with the advent of AIDS as apparently an ailment of the homosexual community, the medical establishment, with the government and the media following suit, once again had a means by which to "control" homosexuality (Altman, Dennis AIDS 40-41).

Ironically, therefore, the visibility of relatively financially stable homosexuals who turned to the medical

community for assistance helped forge the link between homosexuality and AIDS.

A final irony that linked homosexuality to AIDS is that homosexuals were organized and politically active by the early 1980s (Kistenberg 11). Even before the Stonewall incident, as early as 1967, gay groups were organizing. In response to a number of police raids on gay bars in Los Angeles in 1967, several hundred gays and lesbians rallied on Sunset Boulevard (D'Emilio 227). Gay student activist groups were appearing on college campuses across the world, notably at Columbia University, New York University, the Sorbonne, and in the Netherlands (Adam 76). Paralleling and often feeding upon the same motivations that black and feminist liberation groups experienced, gay groups

reject[ed] a fundamentally unequal and corrupt power establishment in favor of participatory democracy whereby all the voiceless and suppressed could gain a measure of control over their own lives. (Adam 76)

The summer of 1969 saw the organization of the New York Gay Liberation Front (as a result of the Stonewall Rebellion), a splinter group from the GLF called the Gay Activists Alliance, the North America Conference of Homophile Organizations in Kansas City, the Street Transvestite Action

Revolutionaries, and black and Hispanic gays organized the Third World Gay Revolution (Adam 79-80). In 1970, Black Panther leader Huey Newton, in sympathy with the gay movement, stated that "homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in the society. Maybe they might be the most oppressed people in the society" (qtd. in Adam 80). The National Gay Task Force was formed in 1972, breaking off from the Gay Activists Alliance (Adam 82).

These early activist groups were vocal and militant. One of the most extreme and liberating accomplishments of these groups was convincing the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illness, as mentioned earlier.

Every major city and college campus in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe was home to a gay liberation group within two years of the Stonewall Rebellion. Organizations both large and small were joined by the founding of the gay liberation press in Los Angeles (Advocate), New York (Come Out!), San Francisco (Gay Sunshine), Boston (Fag Rag), Detroit (Gay Liberator), Toronto (Body Politic), and London (Come Together) (Adam 82).

The political organizations already in place in the homosexual community were among the first to lobby for AIDS

research and support (Kistenberg 11). No other "at risk" group had either the political will or the resources to lobby for help. IV drug addicts were most unlikely to unite in search of help, while Haitians were virtually ignored as a group for fear that linking them to AIDS would be considered racist. If infected Haitians were widely acknowledged, then the government and medical communities would be considered racist not to provide immediate health care and welfare for them (Altman, Dennis AIDS 39). Infected hemophiliacs were simply scarce.

Pressure by the gay activist groups and unending press about AIDS in the homosexual press linked AIDS to homosexuals. Dennis Altman suggests that

The very assertiveness of gay groups, which are comparatively well off in skills and resources, merely strengthens the image of AIDS as a gay disease, and the need to mobilize their own community means that gay leaders reinforce that connection. (AIDS 39)

The ultimate irony, according to Altman, is that homosexuals are somewhat ambivalent towards AIDS. Although they claim that AIDS is not a "gay disease," they tend to talk about it as if that is all it is (AIDS 39).

The feelings of "ownership" homosexuals have about

AIDS have been magnified by society at large, and were specifically at play in the medical community and media when the virus was first discovered. "AIDS has not 'provoked' all the hysterical responses to it," writes Judith Williamson in her article "Every Virus Tells a Story," "it has entered an *already* homophobic, blame-oriented culture obsessed with particular types of closed narratives" (emphasis in original) (79). The most dominant political and social narrative in the Western world is the family narrative, which demands that a man and a woman get married, have children, and the children grow up, get married, have children, and so on. Homosexuality disrupts the narrative. No marriage is possible,⁵ and children cannot be borne to a homosexual couple, with each partner sharing in the creation of the child. The family narrative is reaffirmed in society when homosexuals become the scapegoat for AIDS: the transgressive behavior is doomed by the mark of disease.

The Reagan Era/Error

Making a connection between a disease and a particular group affects the way the political and medical communities proceed in researching the affliction. For example, Dennis Altman points out that claims have been made that because

sickle-cell anemia affects only black people, research on the ailment has been insufficient. It is possible that AIDS might have received more attention from the government and the medical community had it been identified in "other, more respectable groups" (AIDS 41).

The fact that the AIDS epidemic first came into the public's eye during the two-term presidency of Ronald Reagan also had something to do with the slowness of the government even to recognize AIDS as a national issue. The virus that causes AIDS was identified in France over a year and a half before the discovery was officially announced in the United States in April of 1984 (Kramer 22).

Congressman Ted Weiss (Democrat-New York) commented in 1982 about the lack of attention AIDS received in the first two years of the epidemic,

The AIDS crisis warrants more than a business-as-usual response from both the government and the medical-scientific establishment. . . . As you know, three-quarters of all victims are gay men. One cannot separate societal reticence to address the AIDS epidemic from the larger problem of resistance to basic civil rights protection for gays. . . . neither the government nor the medical community has accepted its leadership fully or

devoted sufficient expertise in fighting the insidious epidemic. (158)

For the most part, AIDS came along in the early 1980s, just about the time that the United States was making a swing toward conservative politics and idealism. The 1960s had witnessed the hippie revolution, with a new sexual liberation for women and homosexuals and a new political voice for minorities, particularly black people, coming in the 1970s. The extremely conservative Ronald Reagan, a former film star best known for supporting the "he-man" lead roles, occupied the White House, and his policy to strengthen the military while slashing social welfare was enforced by his "pull yourself up by the boot-straps" nostalgic view of the past. Reagan tried to recreate America as a type of utopia where traditional Christian values meant unopposable world strength and economic stability, and these ideals were privileged over the sometimes unpleasant realities of the present. AIDS in the Reagan era was seen as a self-inflicted damnation, and treatments and any hope for a cure would have to be funded by groups other than the government. Dennis Altman writes about the Reagan Era: "AIDS hits those outside the mainstream of American society at a time when the generosity of that society to its outcasts is declining to a level

previously unknown" (AIDS 28).

In fact, Reagan did not pay any serious public attention to the AIDS crisis until Rock Hudson, a fellow actor, announced his infection with AIDS in 1985. The day after Hudson's announcement on July 23, the Reagan administration reversed its decision to cut the \$96 million AIDS research budget by \$10 million and decided to raise the budget by \$100 million (Kinsella 265-66). Of course, this is before Rock Hudson's gender orientation was revealed, although Hollywood rumors abounded. Later that same year, Ronald Reagan uttered the word "AIDS" in public for the first time when commenting that he understood why parents did not want their children "in school with these kids" who have AIDS (Kinsella 266). So much for charity.

Reagan formed the President's Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic in March 1987, less than one year after the United States Justice department allowed employers to fire people infected with the AIDS virus (Kinsella 267-68). In June 1988, the President's Commission on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Epidemic advocated dramatic increases in AIDS research funding. This recommendation, along with a recommendation for anti-discrimination legislation for those infected, was mostly ignored by the Reagan administration (Kinsella 269).

The bitterness towards Reagan and the conservatism that gave birth to homophobia and AIDS-phobia in the 1980s is still resoundingly felt by the homosexual community, which still champions AIDS causes. Gay playwright/actor/activist Harvey Fierstein exploded, "Fuck you and fuck your father!" to Michael Reagan, Ronald Reagan's son, on the set of Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher during the taping of the May 20, 1997, episode when the discussion turned to Ronald Reagan's handling of AIDS (qtd. in Wockner 8).

Competing Ideologies

Furthermore, "the dominant discourse has reinforced the link between AIDS and sex by continuously referring to AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease" (Kistenberg 12). One means by which the virus is transmitted is through sexual contact, as established by epidemiological evidence, but it is also transmitted by other means. However, study of the other means of transmission were largely disregarded because of the emphasis of study was on homosexuals with AIDS rather than on people who had contracted AIDS by another means (Altman, Dennis AIDS 41).

The two principal scientific theories of etiology of AIDS in the early 1980s were positioned on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, as is normal for discovering the etiology of any disease. The dispute over whether a germ or

environmental issues causes any epidemic is basic, but it is rarely either one scenario or the other; often a germ or virus can only cause damage under certain environmental conditions. The more widely accepted of the two theories in both the scientific and homosexual communities was the "immune overload" theory, an environmentally-based hypothesis according to which persons are repeatedly infected by already known organisms. This theory seems to support the idea that homosexual promiscuity is the cause of infection. The other theory suggests that a "new virus" has surfaced, and it is simply bad luck that it surfaced in the homosexual population. Both theories involve more than strict medical research; they both take into account social ideologies (Dennis Altman, AIDS 42). The former theory could be considered homophobic, while the latter seems rather far fetched.

The suggestion that AIDS was a "homosexual disease," supported to some degree by the proposition of the "immune overload" theory, prompted a number of conspiracy theories in the homosexual community. These theories vary greatly in detail but all have the same theme: that some more powerful entity, usually the government, has conspired to destroy homosexuals. One theory that "AIDS is political germ warfare by the U. S. government" is reprinted in AIDS in the Mind of

America, from a leaflet by the Trotskyist group

Communistcadre:

The artificial nature of the origin and spread of AIDS convicts beyond any reasonable doubt the U. S. government as the creator and purveyor of the dread disease . . . with human intervention - made possible by modern scientific advances perverted to diabolical ends by the war-driven capitalist system of exploitation - it would be possible to guide the evolution of such a new virus as AIDS.

In order to generate a serious epidemic of such a virus among gays one would expect the encouragement of the acceleration of sado-masochism and more violent forms of sexual expression in order to intensify venereal contact into more frequent blood contact. Gay males almost universally describe tremendous social pressure towards such a trend . . . in the late seventies - just before the AIDS breakout. (qtd. in Dennis Altman, AIDS 43)

Other theories of the genesis of the AIDS virus include Larry Flynt's suggestion that the Centers of Disease Control put a substance called "Ogda-Ogda" in K-Y Jelly, that a

chemical was sprinkled on the floors of gay bath-houses, and that governmental experiments in biological warfare had gotten out of control or had been used intentionally (Dennis Altman, AIDS 43; Shannon, Pyle, and Bashshur 34-35). Larry Kramer pokes some fun at the far-fetched theories about the origin of AIDS that he and the other founders of Gay Men's Health Crisis heard in The Normal Heart, including that it is "mystical electromagnetic fields ruled by the planet Uranus" (94). Other theories, both conspiratorial and scientific, flourished at the beginning of the epidemic, and to a large extent they continue today, although the question now is not etiology but prevention. Today's arguments are that opposition to the distribution of free condoms and needles are uncomfortably parallel to the conspiracy theories of yesterday.

The "new virus" theories were not less incredible. Astrophysicist Sir Fred Hoyle suggested that HIV, the retrovirus that ultimately causes AIDS, is of extraterrestrial origin. Other "new virus" theories include the suggestion that HIV was contracted by an African strain of swine virus in Cuban hogs, and that HIV was transferred from sheep to human males by sexual contact. In each of these cases, the virus was "newly" introduced into humanity from its natural host (Shannon, Pyle, and Bashshur 34-35).

A conflation of these disparate theories is that AIDS was a new or unknown virus introduced into a social group whose behavior (in this case, promiscuity) is favorable for those who prefer a multi-factorial explanation of the ailment (Dennis Altman, AIDS 42).

Despite the overabundance - and sometimes silliness - of theories of origin of AIDS, the dominant discourse fostered by the medical community and government, and distributed as truth by the media, has "reinforced the link between AIDS and sex by continuously referring to AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease" (Kistenberg 12), irrespective of the fact that in 1982 - the same year the syndrome was discovered in homosexuals - AIDS was discovered in IV drug users, Haitians, and hemophiliacs.

Consequentially, in the public's mind the link between AIDS as a sexually transmitted disease and AIDS affecting homosexuals results in the further stigmatization of homosexuals and PWAs. Mary Poovey explains:

As long as AIDS is conceptualized primarily by one mode of transmission, for example - as a *sexual* disease - it will belong to the signifying chains that include, on the one hand, syphilis, gonorrhea, and hepatitis, and on the other, transgression, sin, dirtiness, contagion, death.

Sexual intercourse is only one means by which AIDS is transmitted . . . but because this mode of transmission has dominated discussions of the disease, AIDS now seems to be bound up to the moralistic equation of the 1980s: sex = sin = death. (emphasis in original) (Poovey 621)

Once AIDS was identified in the dominant discourse as a sexually transmitted disease, the people who contracted the virus, particularly homosexuals, were understood and categorized as people with an STD, "one of the most potent in the repertory of images of the stigmatized patient" (Gilman 89-90).

"Innocent Victims"

But what about the other groups most often affected by AIDS? Gay men had greater access to medical facilities because they were already an organized and vocal force in the country; they were more visible to the medical community, the media, and thus the public at large. The other "at risk" groups, particularly IV drug users and Haitians, virtually disappeared from media attention. IV drug use has received some mention in the press as a risky behavior, but the use of IV drugs has not received nearly the attention of homosexuality in conjunction with AIDS. Most often, IV drug use is discussed as a means of

contracting HIV, but almost never are infected IV users represented in the discourse dominated by the media, except when the infected person is an "innocent victim" such as a baby infected at birth by a drug-using mother (Kistenberg 14).

The use of the term "AIDS victim" in the dominant discourse is problematic for several reasons, regardless of who is infected with AIDS. The term "innocent victim," and even the term "patient," necessarily implies a dichotomy of persons who seek treatment versus persons who have treatments. The persons who have treatments, according to Kistenberg, are somehow seen as the holders of "truth," and these holders of "truth" are seen as "experts" (14). The problem, though, is that historically the people with the answers, the "experts," have not always had or even vigorously sought "truth."

Before Rock Hudson announced that he had AIDS, gay organizations were almost completely responsible for funding AIDS research. The financial stability of gay men, coupled with the relationship between gay men and the arts - particularly television and movies but also drama and the plastic arts - greatly enhanced funding of private, non-profit AIDS organizations (Patton 16). Gay men and the

organizations they funded became the "experts." The government approached these organizations for help and information when AIDS was discovered to affect populations other than homosexual men. By 1985, the perceived expertise on AIDS had shifted from gay controlled and funded private organizations to government research institutions. Ultimately, "gay men came to be viewed largely as a special 'lobby' rather than as 'experts'" (Patton 18). As such, this "lobby" group was perceived by both the media and the government as a special interest group made up of "victims" of AIDS. Cindy Patton explains the shift:

The new industry [government-sponsored AIDS research institutions] developed a vision of itself and of AIDS work that stood in sharp contrast to the early community activism, in which there were few distinctions between organizers, activists, people living with AIDS, and sympathetic medical workers. It inscribed a rigid role structure which constructed "victims," "experts," and "volunteers" as the *dramatis personae* in its story of AIDS. (20)

The perception of PWAs, regardless of the means of contracting the syndrome, as "victims" suggests that infected people should be pitied and feared, thought of as

lost causes, or seen as the prey of a "victimizer." All of these connotations of the term "victim" are fatalistic at best (Kistenberg 15-16; Grover 29-30).

The discourse of AIDS in the media particularly uses the term "victim" to describe PWAs. These "victims" are blamed for contracting the syndrome and are labeled as shameful or aberrant, because AIDS is linked medically to sexual practices and IV drug use. Those people who contract the syndrome through sexual contact or IV drug use are less likely to seek treatments; they blame themselves, seeing themselves as unworthy of help because they brought their ailment on themselves. When the term "innocent victim" is applied to an infant, a child, or anyone else who contracts the virus in any way other than through sexual contact or IV drug use, the term suggests that others - particularly those infected by sexual contact or IV drug use - should be blamed (Kistenberg 16; Grover 29-30).

The term "AIDS victim" is a major factor in the dominant discourse of AIDS, despite the fact that AIDS researchers and people with AIDS have rejected the term, because it practically forces questions of morality and aberrance to be raised. In 1983, at a lesbian and gay health conference, PWAs specifically opposed being called "victims" in what was called the "Denver Principles": "We condemn

attempts to label us as 'victims,' which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally 'patient,' which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others" (qtd. in Kistenberg 17).

PWAs in the Public Eye

The dominant discourse on AIDS in the late 1990s - supported by the media, the government, and the medical establishment, and therefore accepted as "truth" by the American public at large - presents AIDS as a two-pronged issue: first, that it is a medical issue that ascribes a certain degree of expertise to researchers and scientists, with the often mistaken understanding that work in these areas is apolitical and socially neutral; and second, that it is a social issue colored by the assumption that it affects homosexuals (often regardless of degree of sexual activity) and IV drug users primarily, and Haitians and hemophiliacs incidentally, despite overwhelming evidence that AIDS affects far and away more heterosexuals globally.

AIDS virtually disappeared in the American media in early 1984, when no particularly good breakthroughs or horribly bad discoveries were available to report (Kinsella 140). On April 23, 1984, all of the network newscasts had as

their lead stories Reagan's Secretary of Health Margaret Heckler introducing Dr. Robert Gallo, the head of the Centers of Disease Control. Dr. Gallo reported that the AIDS virus had been found, and the government touted him as the discoverer of the virus (Kinsella 140). This, in spite of the fact that the French government had identified the same virus as the cause of AIDS over a year earlier (Kramer 22). After the Gallo announcement, AIDS reporting virtually disappeared from the major networks: "By year's end, CBS's coverage had been cut in half, NBC's by almost two-thirds . . . ABC spent only slightly more time on AIDS than it had in 1982" (Kinsella 141).

In light of the American public's general supposition that AIDS affects primarily homosexuals and IV drug users, it is interesting to note that the principal public figures in America afflicted with the syndrome since Rock Hudson have been heterosexual, and all but one has contracted the syndrome in an "innocent" way⁶.

Rock Hudson's announcement that he had AIDS on July 15, 1985, did not make national news until over a week later, just after he collapsed in a Paris hotel lobby where he was staying. Hudson was in France for treatments of HPA-23, what was then considered the best hope for a cure of the deadly virus. On July 23, 1985, ABC and NBC reported on the

actor's condition, but CBS made no report at all. By July 25, the day Reagan returned to the White House after colon cancer surgery, all of the major networks had Hudson's affliction with AIDS as their top news stories, bumping even Reagan's cancer story (Kinsella 142-43).

As mentioned earlier, Hudson's infection became the turning point for media coverage about AIDS, perhaps largely because of the President's personal friendship with the actor. Before Hudson's announcement, ABC had reported on AIDS a scant four times; afterwards, their coverage boomed to twenty-eight stories by the end of 1985. The other major network coverage responded similarly. Nationally, electronic coverage on the epidemic tripled, and the print media coverage grew by 270 percent by the end of 1985 (Kinsella 144). Ironically, Hudson's death by complications of AIDS prompted the following statement in an article printed by USA Today on October 2, 1985, the day the actor died: "Many of us are realizing that AIDS is not a 'gay plague,' but everybody's problem" (qtd. in Kinsella 145). This, in spite of the fact that Hudson was indeed gay.⁷

One of the most recognizable "faces of AIDS" is basketball superstar Magic "Earvin" Johnson, who announced to the world that he had tested positive for HIV, the retrovirus that causes AIDS, on November 7, 1991. He also

denied quickly that he was homosexual; he had contracted HIV by promiscuous heterosexual sex. Although Johnson admitted to having sexual relations with hundreds of women, his promiscuity was "excused" to some degree, because he was a sports hero. In fact, an article in U. S. News and World Report penned by Tom Callahan was entitled, "Stunned by Magic: A True American Hero Joins the Battle Against the Deadly AIDS Virus" (emphasis added) (Kistenberg 20). Johnson later filmed a widely distributed documentary about AIDS with Arsenio Hall, and Johnson served as the head of President Bush's AIDS commission. Johnson's revelation that he had contracted HIV through heterosexual sex had the potential of bringing awareness to the American public that HIV/AIDS is not relegated only to homosexuals and IV drug users.

However, the press, one of the three main proponents of the primary discourse on AIDS, undermined the potential by focusing on Johnson's promiscuity. Sports Illustrated sported a story entitled "Dangerous Games" in its November 18, 1991, issue about the promiscuity of professional athletes, and the cover of Time on November 25, 1991, teased its readers about a story on sports groupies entitled "The Dangerous World of Wannabes." In its December 4, 1991, issue, Christian Century featured two articles, one entitled

"Magic and Morality" and the other "Moral Wisdom and Sexual Conduct," both focusing on Johnson's promiscuous behavior. The dominant discourse on AIDS remained dominant.

The two other most recognizable people with AIDS in the United States are widely regarded as "innocent victims." They are Ryan White, a teenage hemophiliac who contracted AIDS by blood transfusion, and Kimberly Bergalis, a woman who claimed to have been infected with HIV by her dentist.

The story of Ryan White scarcely needs to be retold. White, a hemophiliac, was infected with HIV by a blood transfusion in 1984, which caused him to miss much of his seventh grade year. When his mother Jeanne tried to re-enroll asymptomatic Ryan, the school district decided not to allow Ryan back in regular classes; instead, he was to be home-schooled, despite the Indiana State Health Department guidelines that stated that only children with open sores or who cannot control their bodily functions should be barred from attending public school. After the media frenzy about Rock Hudson's AIDS diagnosis died down, reporters sought new angles from which to report the epidemic. Since Ryan White's protest of the school's decision was the first of its type to be heard in a court of law, it was covered by the national media. The three major national networks picked up

on local coverage of the boy's challenge.

When the judge in the Indianapolis federal court refused to hear the White's suit against the school district in August of the same year, the national television media swarmed around the boy, giving the same amount of air time to White as they did to the announcement of the discovery of the AIDS virus. Between July 1985 and December 1986, almost forty national television stories about Ryan White were aired. After the school district was finally ordered to admit Ryan to classes in April 1986, national coverage of the incident virtually disappeared. Ryan White still made occasional television appearances, especially when the story of the day turned into a civil rights question. His picture appeared in innumerable media venues, and even after his death in 1990, his is still one of the most recognizable faces of AIDS (Kinsella 188-93).

Ryan White's story is heart-wrenching and tragic. The American public saw Ryan as an "innocent victim," and certainly he contracted the syndrome by no action of his own. Even through the ordeal the Whites endured during their six years of being in the public eye, the dominant discourse - promulgated by the same media that made Ryan White a martyr - that AIDS is a "homosexual disease" still found its way into American minds. The Kokomo Tribune reporter who

first broke the story about Ryan White, Christopher MacNeil, was regularly accused of being a homosexual, even by his own father. MacNeil received many death threats and was ultimately driven from the city in which he had lived his entire life (Kinsella 190-91).

The story of Kimberly Bergalis sounds more like urban legend than the real life it was, and Americans are much more likely to have heard her story than be able to identify her face. Like Ryan White, Bergalis contracted the AIDS virus passively, through no action on her own part. Bergalis, who died at the age of twenty-three, claimed to have contracted AIDS from her dentist, David Acer. As a result, she campaigned for mandatory AIDS testing of health care workers, and during her testimony before Congress in 1991, she said, "I did not do anything wrong, yet I'm being made to suffer like this" (Leavitt 8). Congress rejected her request because the only other known cases at the time of transmission of HIV from a health care worker to a patient were also patients of Dr. Acer's ("Kimberly Bergalis" 8).

It is hard not to see Ryan White and Kimberly Bergalis as "innocent victims" of AIDS. Neither of them contracted HIV through sexual contact or IV drug use, and both of them were young and fresh-faced. Also, however, they were young,

white, and middle class, exactly the type of people the American public at large wants to sympathize with. Along with Magic Johnson, whose promiscuity has been somewhat "excused" both because it is heterosexual and because he is a sports hero, and Rock Hudson, whose homosexuality is overshadowed by his Hollywood persona, White and Bergalis appear to subvert the dominant discourse of AIDS; however, beyond the pictures and interviews is another story. White and Bergalis are the sympathetic heroes of AIDS, the "innocent victims." The problem, though, is that when the voices of others with AIDS are heard, the American public does not hear with sympathetic ears. Instead, the dirty little question "How did he/she get it?" and the even dirtier accusation that "He/she deserves it" silently creep into the American mind. Even more pressing is the inequity of attention that these few famous PWAs receive from the authors of the dominant discourse, the government, media, and medical establishment. Tom Ehrenfeld of Newsweek writes specifically about Bergalis, but his comments apply to these other famous people with AIDS:

Why is it when a young heterosexual like her gets sick from AIDS, the floor of the Senate rings with action, while when homosexuals and drug users suffer they are insulted, quarantined and hated

(10).

Dramatic Texts Versus Theatrical or Performance Texts

It is not surprising that as more people, especially homosexuals, contracted AIDS, the gay community in particular responded by creating art with AIDS as its subject matter. The first production of a full-length play about AIDS and the AIDS crisis was Robert Chesley's Night Sweat, on May 24, 1984 (Chesley 10-11). Like every AIDS play since its production, Night Sweat put in the public's mind the rather uncomfortable proposition of personally having to come to terms with the syndrome. All of the works in this study have been produced live, some have been made into films for television or theatrical release, but all of them are in print and cry out to be read and contemplated. The dramatic texts of these plays are particularly important, because taken as a whole, they constitute a continuum by which one may observe how AIDS is perceived, especially by homosexual or sympathetic playwrights - some of whom have HIV/AIDS or have died from complications of the syndrome - and more importantly, how that perception has evolved over the course of the approximately twenty years since Chesley's play was first performed.

The ten plays in this study are the most important and influential of the plays about AIDS, for varying reasons.

These plays reflect the reception of AIDS in America over time, as understood by homosexual or sympathetic playwrights. An understanding of the motivations behind each of the plays, a glimpse at the audiences/readers of the plays, and a critical examination of each of the plays reveals that the direction of the dominant discourse about AIDS is changing.

If plays are truly "models of behavior, imitations of life which reflect back onto it (Feingold xv), then the plays about AIDS in this study must reflect the attitudes of the playwrights on the subject of AIDS. Because all of the playwrights represented in this study are homosexual except one, and some of them have/had HIV/AIDS themselves, their plays most often recognize the challenge that gay men have had in facing down the destructive dominant discourse, on both the page and on the stage.

This study necessarily takes the dramatic texts as opposed to the theatrical or performance texts as its primary emphasis. Keir Elam, in The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, explains the difference between the two:

"Theatre" is taken to refer . . . to the complex phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction; that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself

and with the systems underlying it. By "drama", on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ("dramatic") conventions.

(2)

Literary scholars tend to privilege the dramatic text over the theatrical or performance text, seeing the latter as a completion, either real or imagined, of the former (Elam 208). However, to a large degree the two texts are inseparable.

A scholar of dramatic texts assumes a role not unlike that of a director in theatrical or performance texts. Drama scholars "see" the action in their minds, assigning roles and directing action as the text in their hands lead. The drama scholars' duality of function becomes especially clear when reading works by Shakespeare, for example. Shakespeare used stage directions sparsely, so when a character speaks, the scholars must envision the action to determine to whom the character speaks and what the character does. At the crux of his distress about Desdemona's perceived infidelity, Othello addresses his words to both a candle and his wife:

Put out the light, and then put out the light.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,

I can again the former light restore,

Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume (V.i.6-13a)

Only by the context clues can the scholars of the dramatic text ascertain when Othello speaks to the candle and when he speaks to his sleeping wife⁸. They read the text and replay the action in their minds, in a sense "directing" the action of the play.

The conventions of dramatic literature themselves demand a sort of intertextuality between the written text and the theatrical or performance text (Elam 209). Characters' words are printed on the page in dialogue, and the third person narration of action and description comes only in stage directions, and then only occasionally. Characters in dramatic texts are, in a rather literal sense, meant to be fleshed out by actors who are costumed in sometimes peculiar ways and whose motions are fulfillment of the words on the page.

NOTES

¹ According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, was first reported in the United States in 1981. AIDS is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which kills or impairs the immune system. As a result, the body's ability to fight infections and certain cancers is compromised. Life-threatening opportunistic infections are caused by normally benign microbes in healthy people. More than 600,000 cases have been reported in the United States since 1981; as many as 900,000 Americans may be HIV-positive.

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected partner, contact with infected blood, sharing of needles or syringes that are contaminated with minute quantities of infected blood, or from mother to unborn fetus during pregnancy or birth.

Asymptomatic infection is variable. For some people, symptoms begin appearing after just a few months; others may appear symptom-free for as long as a decade. During the asymptomatic period, HIV is infecting and killing immune system cells, revealing itself by the marked decline of CD4+ T cells.

The term AIDS is applied to advanced HIV infection.

Various cancers frequently occur during this phase, especially those caused by viral infections, including Kaposi's sarcoma, cervical cancer, and lymphomas. Many people with AIDS are debilitated so severely that they cannot even perform daily chores, while others experience life-threatening illnesses followed by periods of normal function.

No drugs were available to treat AIDS when it first surfaced. Since then, three classes of drugs have been used to treat HIV infection. The first class, nucleoside analog reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs) interrupt an early stage of virus replication. Zidovudine, or AZT, is in this class, which slows the spread of HIV in the body and delays opportunistic infections. A second class, non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs) are also used, in combination with other antiretroviral drugs. The third class of drugs are called protease inhibitors, which interrupt later stages of virus replication. A combination of the classes of drugs is most often prescribed today.

There is no cure for HIV infection or AIDS.

² The incident at the Stonewall Inn is pivotal in the gay liberation movement. This incident is referred to in various ways throughout the literature of homosexual discourse and in popular homosexual vernacular. It is

referred to as the Stonewall Rebellion, the Stonewall riot, the Stonewall war, the Stonewall raid, and often just Stonewall.

³ The Matachine Action Committee is part of the Matachine Society, created in Los Angeles in 1951. It was named for the Italian court jester who expressed unpopular beliefs from behind his mask. Its founders, Henry Hay, Bob Hull, and Chuck Rowland desired political and social change for gay people and challenged attacks on homosexuals. The mission of the Matachine Society is to unify, educate, lead, and assist homosexuals who suffered from oppression (Adam 62).

⁴ The anniversary of the raids on the Stonewall Inn has become the approximate date of most Gay Pride parades throughout America. These parades, along with various marches on national and state capitols, have become a continuous symbol of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered unity, strength, determination, and courage.

⁵ The question of homosexual marriage is another issue altogether, but one might be tempted to speculate that AIDS might not have been associated so closely with homosexuals if gay marriage had been legal and warmly embraced by society at large. This is not to imply that homosexuals would never have contracted AIDS, but if gay marriage had

been widely accepted, promiscuity as a means of social identification and as a source of empowerment would likely

have been reduced, thereby limiting the risk of exposure to the virus.

⁶ While every person who lives with or dies of HIV/AIDS deserves public notice, this study focuses only on a few whose HIV/AIDS status received a great deal of media attention.

⁷ Hudson's image as a square-jawed he-man stood in direct contrast with the mincing, flamboyant Liberace, another celebrity whose death from complications of AIDS in 1987 received a fair amount of publicity. Perhaps the idea in the American public's mind that Hudson could not have been homosexual because he and the characters he played were so manly, as opposed to the public's perception that Liberace was the stereotypical homosexual (Especially in his later years, Liberace's stage persona was exceptionally chichi.), accounts for the sympathy Hudson demands even now. Why Hudson comes to mind as a person with AIDS has to do with his perceived status as "victim," whereas Liberace comes to mind because of his flamboyant homosexuality. Other homosexual celebrities who have died of AIDS are also pitied by the American public, probably because of the

wholesomeness of the characters they are most associated with, including Robert Reed, Mike Brady of The Brady Bunch, who died in 1992, and Dick Sargent, Darrin Stevens of Bewitched, who died in 1994.

⁸ Modern editors of Shakespeare texts usually insert stage actions parenthetically into Shakespeare's sparse stage directions, so that readers do not have to rely so heavily on context clues for action. The stage directions for this scene in Othello read, "*Enter OTHELLO [with a light]; and DESDEMONA in her bed*" (V.i.sd).

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST AIDS PLAYS

Once more, hail, and farewell! farewell, thou young
But ah! too short, Marcellus of our tongue!
Thy brows with ivy and with laurels bound;
But fate and gloomy night encompass thee around.
John Dryden, "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham"

In the 1970's the gay community had pulled together after the Stonewall riots to become a political and social force across the country, especially in urban centers such as New York and San Francisco. Gay men were becoming more vocal and demanding about their sexual identity, and for many of them, sexuality and sexual freedom was the means to self-actualization and definition. Bathhouses, backroom bars, and sex clubs flourished in the seventies, because sexuality was the defining attribute of a liberated homosexual. One of the longest-surviving people with AIDS in the U.S., musician Michael Callen, recalls:

During the seventies I considered myself a lowly private doing battle on the front lines of the sexual revolution. I joked that I was a fast-food sex junkie. For me, being gay *meant* having lots of sex. (qtd. in Andriote 21)

A vast majority of well-known homosexual authors recall similar feelings. Arnie Kantrowitz, Chuck Frutche, and Armistead Maupin remember the early seventies as secure, philosophically balanced, and cozy (Andriote 20-22).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, gay sexuality paralleled mainstream America's newfound sexuality. Bette Midler and Barry Manilow got their showbiz breaks by playing and singing to the straight "after eight" crowd and the towel-only-clad patrons of the Continental Baths in New York City. The Mine Shaft, arguably the best known gay sex club in New York, flourished in the seventies and early eighties (Andriote 22-23). The club was dark, with lights blinking and flashing to pounding disco. Pants were skin-tight, and dark corners, dusky halls, and semi-private rooms were peopled with customers having all varieties of sex.

Night Sweat

The commercial success of clubs like The Mine Shaft helped enable the explosion of innumerable gay and straight discos across America, playing music sung either by gay artists or with definite gay themes. In many ways, disco typifies gay liberation in its emphasis on sex, dancing, and night life.¹

It is precisely in this disco-cum-sex club atmosphere

that Robert Chesley sets Night Sweat: A Romantic Comedy in Two Acts, the first full-length play about AIDS to be produced (Chesley 10).² Night Sweat shows RICHARD, a man with AIDS, paying ten thousand dollars to check into the Coup de Grace: The Experience! The Ultimate Club!, a sex club/disco/bathhouse where men with what appears to be AIDS (The term is never mentioned in the play, but one character does trace the letters "A-I-D-S" in the air.) pay for "the Experience": the patrons' sex fantasies are fully realized by the staff of the club, and the fantasies end in the patrons' deaths. The elaborate fantasies of the patrons come one after the other in the play, and the entire work is surreal and bizarre. The representations of sadomasochism, suicide, and gay sex on stage alienated the audiences of New York City, particularly since the play was on the boards at the premiere gay theater in the nation. "In a city besieged by AIDS," writes David Roman, "a play about a suicide service for gay men with AIDS was bound to be dismissed . . ." (56). The play is not particularly polemical; missing are Brechtian political devices one might expect from a play that so alienates its readers and viewers (Roman 55).

Night Sweat opened at the Meridian Gay Theatre in New York City on May 24, 1984. In his introduction, Chesley

admits that reaction to the play was "very divided. Some people loved it, but even closest friends behaved as if [he] had placed something at their feet which it was best to step over and politely ignore" (10). The New York Native theater reviewer, Jeffrey Matson, wrote that

the scattershot dramaturgy . . . combined with the play's ugly vision and insulting depictions, especially of the AIDS victims . . . adds to a needlessly downbeat evening and seems a shameful offering from New York City's only regularly producing gay theater organization. (qtd. in Roman 55)

The play offers no real hope, no fighting spirit for the men with AIDS who seek the Experience, and as such, it was far out of touch with the emotional and political needs of the gay community of the 1980s (Roman 56), in spite of the fact that Richard is finally "rescued" from the Club by TOM, a friend and fellow Club member, and ALLAN, his former lover.

The play reinforces the "sex equals death" equation already manifest in the dominant discourse controlled by the media, government, and medical establishment. When RICHARD explains to TOM why he has joined the Club, he both captures the ideology of the Club and reiterates the idea that sex equals death in this new world of AIDS:

RICHARD: . . . well, the word "beauty" keeps
sticking in my mind . . .

TOM: Beauty?

RICHARD: Yeah, I guess. I mean like a flower? A
cut flower? It's beautiful as it dies. It's like
an orgasm, sort of. It's beautiful, intensely,
and then it's over, and it's just that moment that
makes it beautiful: losing it, letting go. You
long for it, and then - am I making any sense?

(23)

The long literary tradition that the sex act is a "little death" is relevant here, but the dominant discourse that ultimately suggests that AIDS equals death does not persuade the affected persons with AIDS; however, metaphorical language such as RICHARD's in this scene suggests that PWAs have lived their beautiful, intense lives, and now they should die. This statement by RICHARD is full of regret, and it is self-defeating.

"So what is Night Sweat about?" writes the author in his introduction (10). He continues,

It's about a community which based a significant
part of its identity - and economy - on a
celebration of sex now facing a lethal sexually-
transmitted disease. It's about the so-called

"self-destructive lifestyle" of the '70s and early '80s, and the relation of this to the psychological connection between sex and the death wish. It's about paralyzing fear. It's about loss of hope. It's about underlying gay self-hatred and masochism. It's about the necessity of accepting oneself and one's needs. (10)

The play certainly holds true to Chesley's description in his introduction, excepting the final sentence. Night Sweat captures some of the ugliest visions of homosexuality ever dramatized.

Eight scenes are played that represent the death fantasies of eight men with AIDS, and as a means of achieving continuity, RICHARD's suicide is being planned throughout the play. Each of these scenes represent stereotypical fantasies of gay men, and some are more graphic and disturbing than others. It is rather difficult to see how this play embraces PWAs and how, as Chesley's

introduction claims, it allows a man with AIDS to accept himself and his needs.

The characters in the play never speak the word AIDS, but it is clear that the patrons of the Club are infected with the syndrome. In Act One, Scene One, RICHARD's voice

is heard over the speaker while the audience sits in darkness: "RICHARD'S VOICE: I called the clinic today, to make the appointment. . . . it felt better to do something about . . . those little symptoms I think I might have, but I'm not sure" (15). RICHARD suspects AIDS, and he confirms his suspicion in the office of the DIRECTOR of the Club: "DIRECTOR: Does he (ALLAN, RICHARD's ex-lover) know about your . . .? RICHARD: Diagnosis? No - I - couldn't tell him" (18). Since he has AIDS, RICHARD sees no hope for his future, and he has joined the Club to end his life so that he does not have to face the next year and a half alone and ill. His fantasy death is terminal sex. In a meeting with RICHARD, the DIRECTOR questions him about his choice:

DIRECTOR: The choice, of course, is yours. But I recommend that you wait a few days. I suspect that terminal sex is your *second* choice, a what-the-hell alternative.

RICHARD: Well, I can't have my first choice.

DIRECTOR: Which is?

RICHARD: To live, I guess. If I could. (37)

RICHARD has given up all real hope; he sees his condition as hopeless.

RICHARD's fantasy, death by sex, is played out in the last scene of the play. It is set in "The Ultimate Disco"

on a raised platform covered in leather in the center of the stage. Two HUNKY MEN, wearing only jock straps and logger's boots, fondle and strip RICHARD, while other CLUB MEMBERS who are waiting for their own deaths smoke marijuana and watch the show. The stage directions explain graphically what the character RICHARD experiences:

(The FIRST HUNKY MAN is fucking RICHARD from behind, while the SECOND HUNKY MAN is kneeling in front of him, sucking him and reaching up to pinch his tits. . . . the FIRST HUNKY MAN sprays ethyl on two ends of a black handkerchief, putting one end into RICHARD's mouth and the other end into his own; they breathe deeply.) (65 s.d.)

Scenes like this one are abundant in Night Sweat, which accounts partially for the play's lack of production. More importantly, though, this scene represents the sexual fantasy of many homosexual men, and it is a fantasy that thousands of gay men realized at sex clubs like The Mine Shaft.

It is the juncture of hot, orgiastic sex and inevitable death that is unsettling to the audience member or reader of this play. RICHARD is rescued from his death by TOM and two other men, all dressed as nuns as a means of adding light-hearted camp to an otherwise dire situation. TOM, a fellow

Club member who represents the only real political force in the play, was to be murdered outside Club property by two FAG-BASHERS and to have the word "AIDS" carved in his flesh as a political message to the world. This is the only specific reference to AIDS in the play (35-36).

TOM's rescue is rather *deus ex machina*; the entire end of the play is hokey and pollyanna-ish. This rescue is supposedly the most hopeful point of the play - the fact that RICHARD is saved from death the way he is implies that at best, a metaphorical rescue from AIDS is at hand. TOM tells RICHARD that he should "Live until the very moment [he] die[s]!" and that he should "Enjoy it all, from the most delicate cruising to the heaviest S and M trips!" (66). The other two men dressed as nuns remove their habits and are dressed only in chaps. TOM tells RICHARD that he and the two other men, SISTER DICK and SISTER HAIRY, are into sadomasochism, bondage, and "vanilla" sex. (The men who play the nuns are the same who play the FAG-BASHERS.)

At the end of the scene, RICHARD is "rescued" from immediate death, but his attention is more focused on the hunky nuns than the opportunity to reunite with ALLAN, his former lover. RICHARD's lustful glances at the men formerly dressed as nuns minimizes the rescue. If the message of the play is that PWAs and others should take life as it comes

and the scene closes with loud disco music playing, disco lights flashing, and a banner falling from the ceiling, announcing the death of BUNNY, another CLUB MEMBER, who ends the play shouting at the audience, "I don't want to die!" several times. The music stops, and BUNNY pleads with the audience, "I want to live!" (66-67).

Probably the most disturbing scene in Night Sweat comes in the fifth scene of the second act. By now the readers/audience members have seen a number of suicides as arranged by the Club. The lights come up on a Crematorium set, decorated as a medieval dungeon and lit by candles. This suicide fantasy is that of WILLIAM JEPHTHA WILLIAMS, the creator of the Sepulchre Baths and Disco (57). A GRAND INQUISITOR questions the naked WILLIAMS while two TORTURERS wearing black hoods, tights, and boots hold him:

GRAND INQUISITOR: William Jeptha Williams! You are called here to confess the truth of your crimes against nature and humanity, and to suffer the punishment of death by fire for these same crimes!

(56)

The accusation itself is reminiscent of ultra-conservative religious leaders like Jerry Falwell, who furtively assert that homosexuality is "a crime against nature," and that homosexuals with AIDS in particular deserve a demoralizing

death. Certainly the parallel between the torture of a homosexual man with AIDS and the Spanish Inquisition is by design, and the fact that WILLIAMS is to be burned to death suggests the burnings at the stake of supposed witches in this country in seventeenth-century Salem.

The GRAND INQUISITOR requires of WILLIAMS a great deal of information to establish the privilege in which he indulged all of his life, all while the TORTURERS either apply or threaten to apply red-hot iron rods to the soles of WILLIAMS's feet. WILLIAMS is absurdly wealthy, has an almost perfect body, and he is well-educated (a "son of Harvard") (56-57). WILLIAMS earned his money by owning the Sepulchre Baths and Disco.

It is necessary to note just how important bathhouses and discos were to the newly-liberated gay male community in the late seventies and early eighties. These bathhouses were welcome to members of the subculture who derived much of their identity from sex, particularly anonymous sex. Dennis Altman describes what went on in a bathhouse, especially before the AIDS epidemic:

Most striking is a large disco floor on the top story . . . where men dance clad only in towels, their movements jerky under the strobe lights. In

the basement there is a small swimming pool, showers, and steamrooms; the main floor is largely occupied by a maze of small rooms that people hire for eight hours at a time; there is always a door or two open, with men, all-but-naked, lying inside in wait for a temporary partner. . . . Men in bathhouses rarely talk much, and it is quite common for sex to take place without words, let alone names, being exchanged. Yet even the most transitory encounters are part of a heightened eroticism that pervades the building; there is a certain sexual democracy, even camaraderie, that makes the sauna attractive. The willingness to have sex immediately, promiscuously, with people about whom one knows nothing and from whom one demands only physical contact, can be seen as a sort of Whitmanesque democracy, a desire to know and trust other men in a type of brotherhood far removed from the male bonding of rank, hierarchy, and competition that characterizes much of the outside world.³ (Homosexualization 79-80)

Although Altman describes a Chicago bathhouse, the same description holds true of other bathhouses, including Robert Chesley's fictional bathhouse in Night Sweat. Paramount in

bathhouse activity, then, is anonymous sex as a means of self-actualization and unity.⁴

WILLIAMS, as the owner of the Sepulchre Baths and Disco, has ample opportunity to participate in the libidinous brotherhood. The GRAND INQUISITOR demands him to speak his crime, threatening WILLIAMS with red-hot iron bars. WILLIAMS cries out, "I suck over a thousand cocks a year! I take it up the ass! I take drugs!" and he later confesses that he likes fisting (when a man puts his fingers, hand, and sometimes forearm in another man's anus) (58). Clearly WILLIAMS feels some degree of guilt for having indulged so readily in sexual activity, and when the GRAND INQUISITOR forces WILLIAMS to admit that he is a "faggot," the INQUISITOR once again reinforces the image of the conservative community punishing homosexuals by claiming that AIDS is punishment from on high. Gay men in the New York audience in 1984 would have become rather uncomfortable watching this scene. They would have felt themselves put on trial for achieving a new freedom. It is likely that many of their life choices were in subconscious or even conscious conflict with their religious or moral upbringing, so the accusation the GRAND INQUISITOR makes of WILLIAMS is redirected to accuse the gay audience members, or at least make them think about the accusations.

More offensive than the suggestion that homosexuality itself is a crime is WILLIAMS's confession that he was part of a conspiracy to test engineered viruses on the homosexual men at the bathhouse. While extracting WILLIAMS'S final confession, the GRAND INQUISITOR uncovers a shrouded corpse hanging on a wall and demands that Williams confess once again. WILLIAMS cries out that he killed the man hanging, that:

I killed you all! I killed you! I betrayed you!
Why didn't you ask me about my silent partners?
Why didn't you ask who else owns the Sepulchre?
Did you think I would resist the offer they made?
Did you think I would care if they experimented
with newly engineered viruses at the Sepulchre? I
sold you *all* down the river! Because you *deserve*
to die, faggots! We *all* deserve to die! You fools!
You assholes! You stupid faggots! I chose the
money! 'Cause money is a bigger and harder dick
than you've ever seen! Money is the biggest and
hardest dick there is! (59)

This scene is a reminder that rumors about the initial source of AIDS had circulated wildly during the first few years of the epidemic. One common urban legend about the origin of AIDS was that the government (presumably the

unnamed "they" in the above quotation) had been secretly experimenting with viruses (Altman, AIDS 42), perhaps in hopes of "winning" the Cold War. WILLIAMS's confession that he, a bathhouse/disco owner, was in collusion with "their" experiments at the Sepulchre (The name of the bathhouse is chilling, yet true to the subculture's enchantment with dark places and its ironic death-wish fascination so abundantly portrayed in this play.) serves to destabilize the audience member/reader once again. This time, the homosexual men watching the play feel betrayed by the providers of security. Bathhouses were the home of the brotherhood of homosexual men, and if WILLIAMS, who theatrically represents all bathhouse owners, has betrayed them, then he has sold them out to "them" for no more than money. Furthermore, WILLIAMS's earlier confession that he had had sex with thousands of men suggests that he had likely had sex with many of his bathhouse customers. Not only has WILLIAMS sold out his customers for money, he has actually had sex with some of them and then sold them out. Homosexual men in the audience once again feel violently disconnected; the brotherhood so poetically described by Dennis Altman above fails, the individual who derives his identity and security in sexuality fails, and ultimately the gay revolution fails.

Chesley's Night Sweat is probably not the best

representation of characters with AIDS on stage; nonetheless, it was the first full-length play about AIDS to be presented. The lesson it tries to teach at its close - that gay men with AIDS should not give up on life, but they should love until they die - gets lost easily among the disturbing images throughout the play. Taken individually, some of the scenes of sado-masochism are quite erotic and intense, up to the point at which the fantasy ends in death. The problem, though, is that ticking in the back of the audience member/readers' minds is a bomb, AIDS. It is inescapable even in the most erotic fantasies in Night Sweat. Although the play fumblingly tries to offer hope, the attempt ultimately fails. Instead, it leaves an uneasy feeling of eroticism, corrupted by feelings of guilt, and defiled by visions of death.

Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart and William Hoffman's As Is, both produced in major venues in New York City in 1985, are largely viewed as the first important AIDS plays and were applauded for introducing AIDS to the stage. Both plays generated a relatively large amount of critical coverage,⁵ since both featured well-known actors, directors, and designers (Roman 58). The two plays work together to initiate the tone of AIDS plays to come: both works feature a central character with AIDS, and both works delve into the

relationships of all of the characters with AIDS, although the emphasis differs for each of the plays. Kramer's The Normal Heart is an autobiographical work, tracing Kramer's frustration with establishing New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis. NED WEEKS, Kramer's alter-ego, argues that gay men must stop having sex in order to stop the crisis. Kramer as WEEKS blasts the government, media, and particularly the gay community itself for not taking seriously enough the fight against the incipient crisis. Hoffman's As Is is a more personal introduction to AIDS. It focuses on the love relationship between RICH, who has just been diagnosed with AIDS, and SAUL, his former lover. The play shows not only the effect that AIDS has on these men's relationship with each other, but also the effects AIDS has on their relationships with many others, including hospital workers, family, and friends. As Is is not a political treatise like The Normal Heart; instead, Hoffman's goal is to change the hearts and minds of the audience by making them understand the human side of AIDS.

The Normal Heart

Larry Kramer has been called the "shrill Cassandra" of the AIDS crisis (Baker 176). The month after the New York Times reported "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" on July 3, 1981, Kramer wrote the article, "A Personal Appeal," in

the New York Native, warning the gay men of New York that "the many things we've done over the past years may be all that it takes for a cancer to grow from a tiny something-or-other that got in there who knows when from doing who knows what" (qtd. in Bergman 125). Robert Chesley, the author of Night Sweat, countered Kramer's appeal in his own letter to the Native: "The concealed meaning in Kramer's emotionalism is the triumph of guilt: that gay men deserve to die from promiscuity. . . .the subtext is . . . the wages of gay sin [is] death" (qtd. in Bergman 125).

Kramer's crusade for gay men to take responsibility for their own actions found voice in his 1978 novel Faggots, a satire of the New York homosexual community, in which he suggests that the only alternative to "fuck[ing] yourself to death" (265) is a type of homosexual marriage (Bergman 126). This opinion is echoed further in The Normal Heart when FELIX, a writer for the New York Times, tells NED, "Your novel was all about a man desperate for love and a relationship, in a world filled with nothing but casual sex" (Kramer 53). There ensued an open-letter feud between Kramer and many others, particularly Robert Chesley. Kramer insisted that gay men stop having sex altogether as a means of stopping AIDS, but more importantly, he tends

to place the gay community within the bosom of the

heterosexual family [which is] the reason his work speaks so powerfully and uneasily to gay readers, for it suggests a vision of reconciliation both keenly desired and frustratingly delayed. (Bergman 128)

Thus Kramer finds himself in a difficult position. He hates AIDS and everything associated with it. He hates the exclusionary attitude of the American public, who sees AIDS in 1985 as almost exclusively "a gay disease" as promulgated by the dominant discourse. At the same time, though, Kramer's ultimate desire for homosexuals to be readily accepted into the bosom of America rings true for other people, especially those people both gay and straight who have fought, organized, and protested for full freedom under the law for homosexuals.

The Normal Heart is Kramer's pièce de clef. It is based largely on Kramer's own founding of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City and his own frustration with sexual encounters since the plague struck. In the play, Kramer's character, NED WEEKS, founds an organization designed to inform and persuade the homosexual men of New York City to stop having sex because of the new "gay cancer," and he spends a weekend on Fire Island raising money to help defray

costs. NED also goes to his brother BEN, a high-power attorney, to get the new organization represented *pro bono*. NED is subsequently removed from the organization after having been accused of manipulating fear and "merchandising" the epidemic by exploiting the deaths of gay men all over America (Kramer 113). Larry Kramer personally experienced these and many other events portrayed in The Normal Heart. Kramer wrote to Tim Sweeney, then director of the Gay Men's Health Crisis:

I love GMHC as much as, if not more than, most. After all, it was founded in my living room, I gave it its name . . . I arranged for my brother's law firm to be its legal counsel *pro bono*, which they [sic] still are, and I gave it two years of my life, full time. (qtd. in Bergman 129)

The Normal Heart is in the tradition of agitprop theater (Roman 61), designed both to educate the audience about AIDS and the failure of the medical establishment, the government, the media, and leaders in the gay and lesbian movement to recognize and do something about the crisis, and to indoctrinate the audience in AIDS activism. According to David Roman, the play "relentlessly castigate[s] the various structures of power contributing to the AIDS crisis" (61), and Kramer agrees that such was his purpose. Kramer writes

in the introduction to his later play, Just Say No: A Play About a Farce that "Theater should astonish, amaze, frighten, shock, purge, touch, and move Make you

angry. Make you cry. Make you laugh. Help you learn.

Inspire. All of the above" (xiv).

Gay novelist Andrew Holleran writes in the introduction to The Normal Heart:

The Normal Heart is, after all, a history play - of the past five years: a period in which thousands died. . . .you will find virtually every fact, statistic, issue, anguish, lament, and question It is a hunk of reality which has been depicted for us, so current that, to paraphrase a film critic, the sirens you hear on stage are the sirens you hear when you walk out of the theater. (27)

Holleran perhaps exaggerates the comparison of real life and theater, but not much. Certainly The Normal Heart does not adhere to the classical unity of time suggested by Aristotle in The Poetics; a five-year history of AIDS is compressed into almost 125 pages in the play. While Kramer does not literally address every "fact, statistic, issue, anguish, lament, and question," he does present the audience with a

fictional accounting of actual events that is at least true to the spirit of the first five years of the epidemic. Holleran, like Kramer, is a gay writer who recognized the urgency of the AIDS crisis, so his comment that the sirens on stage are the same as the ones outside the theater, which appears in the introduction to The Normal Heart, complements the playwright's urgent tone.

The play opens in the medical office of DR. EMMA BROOKNER, the polio-stricken internist whom NED meets while accompanying his friend CRAIG for a check-up. NED and DR. BROOKNER quickly agree that the new "cancer" she has been seeing much of is dangerous and the consequences of it must be made widely known immediately. DR. BROOKNER urgently desires to see the new syndrome checked, but she is caught in the politics of medicine. When NED asks her what is happening in the search for answers about this unknown killer, DR. BROOKNER replies that no cure is on the horizon, and that one should not be expected soon, because ". . . nobody important is going to give a damn because it seems to be happening mostly to gay men. Who cares if a faggot dies?" (Kramer 34). NED suggests that she do something about it, but she replies, "Doctors are extremely conservative; they try to stay out of anything that smells political, and this smells" (Kramer 34).

DR. BROOKNER is not trying to evade the issue; instead, she knows "how the game is played" in her profession. EMMA knows that the government is at the fiscal heart of big medical research, and that the media is a player in how the money is spent. She tells NED that The New England Journal of Medicine finally published a study her hospital sent in over a year earlier, and that the New York Times ran finally something on page 20, in reality the "Rare Cancer" article. NED asks EMMA what the Health Department's position is, to which she replies, "They know about it," but then explains that the city's reputation got tarnished during the Swine Flu epidemic. She also mentions that the mayor is a bachelor who may be skittish of being perceived as too "gay-friendly" (Kramer 35).

DR. EMMA BROOKNER sides with NED WEEKS and the activists who seek answers about this new gay disease, and she lends authority to the warnings against promiscuous sex that NED voices. NED has tried to convince his activist group that they must tell gay men to have safe sex, but now EMMA tells NED he must convince them to avoid having sex at all, to "get a VCR, rent a porn film, and use [their] hands!" (Kramer 79). NED yells back at her:

Why are you yelling at me for what I'm not doing?

What the fuck is your side doing? Where's the

goddamned AMA in all of this? The government has not started one single test tube of research. Where's the board of directors of your very own hospital? You have so many patients you haven't got rooms for them (Kramer 80)

NED quickly apologizes to EMMA, because he realizes that she is doing all she can, which is far more than most other people he has encountered. EMMA empathizes with NED and the other people affected by this new virus, because the debilitating polio she was stricken with was also a virus. EMMA realizes that the virus could have taken hold in any population at any time (Kramer 80).

Towards the end of Act Two, EMMA sits alone in a spotlight on stage, facing an examining doctor who represents the government's position on her research into the new virus. This juncture between the medical establishment and the government creates a mood that is rather condemning: the spotlight glares into her eyes and she sees only the silhouette of the government's man who has come to take away her support:

EMMA: Five million dollars doesn't seem quite right for some two thousand cases. The government spent twenty million investigating seven deaths from Tylenol. We are now almost into the third

year of this epidemic.

EXAMINING DOCTOR: Unfortunately the President has threatened to veto. As you know, he's gone on record as being unalterably and irrevocably opposed to anything that might be construed as an endorsement of homosexuality. (Kramer 108)

EMMA is referring to the three months in 1982 during which seven cases of poisoning were directly linked to Tylenol capsules that were tampered with. Kramer uses this statistic and many others in a scenic element of the play. All over the walls of the theater and set were painted facts and figures about the AIDS crisis, including the number of Tylenol cases reported (7), the number of times the Times wrote about the Tylenol scare (54), the number of cases of AIDS during the first nineteen months of the epidemic (958), and the number of times the Times wrote about AIDS during the same time period (7) (Kramer 20-21).

The response the EXAMINING DOCTOR makes to EMMA is indicative of the government's position on AIDS until Rock Hudson's death. Ronald Reagan was President, and only his friendship with Hollywood crony Hudson spurred President Reagan to increase funding of AIDS research.

EMMA is ultimately told she will not be funded for her

research, although her argument for funding is quite convincing:

I am taking care of more victims of the epidemic than anyone in the world. We have more accumulated test results, more data, more frozen blood samples, more experience! How can you not fund my research or invite me to participate in yours?

(Kramer 109)

Kramer's design to make the sympathetic audience/reader feel impotent in the hands of the government is successful. While realizing that the characters on the page and on the stage are fictionalized versions of real people, one cannot help but become enraged at the insensitivity and utter stupidity of the government for not funding such important work by someone with so much experience and heart.

In the end, DR. EMMA BROOKNER does not embrace the dominant discourse espoused by the medical establishment. She does not wish to treat her patients as statistics or experiments. Her earnestness carries throughout the play. Her warnings about the uncaring nature of research hospitals to FELIX, NED's dying lover, her angry fights with NED about getting the word out, her self-conscious realizations that the AIDS virus, like her polio virus, does not discriminate in victimizing all justify FELIX's choice to have EMMA

perform a unification ceremony for FELIX and NED just before FELIX dies of complications from AIDS.

DR. EMMA BROOKNER recognizes all too well that big medicine, especially research, is done at the whim of the government. She tells FELIX that "Uncle Sam is the only place these days that can afford the kind of research that's needed" (Kramer 92), but it is really the city government and the New York Times that Kramer attacks most avidly. Reading from an article for the newly-formed health organization's newsletter, NED WEEKS says

It is no secret that I consider the Mayor to be, along with the Times, the biggest enemy gay men and women must contend with in New York. Until the day I die I will never forgive this newspaper and this Mayor for ignoring this epidemic that is killing so many of my friends. (Kramer 73)

The Times had run exactly seven articles about the epidemic during its first nineteen months. New York Mayor Ed Koch allocated only \$75,000 for public education and community services as of the opening of the play on April 21, 1985

(Kramer 20). In an interview with the London Times, Kramer told interviewer Sheridan Morley,

When my play first opened in New York the Times

there ran a disclaimer under the review, denying that they had ever tried to ignore the AIDS issue. . . . and when we were in rehearsal they had lawyers from the New York Times and the Mayor's office checking us out for libel. (8)

When the organization seeks city help in finding a place of operation, they are pawned off on the Mayor's gay assistant, HIRAM KEEBLER. BRUCE, the elected leader of the organization, tells KEEBLER that they are in need of office space, because

BRUCE: no one will rent to us because of what we do and who we are.

HIRAM: That's illegal discrimination.

TOMMY: We believe we know that to be true, sir.

MICKEY: (*Nervously speaking up.*) Mr. Keebler, sir, it is not illegal to discriminate against homosexuals. (Kramer 86-87).

This rather broad swing at governmental policy that MICKEY, a veteran of the Stonewall rebellion, makes actually does hit square on. There were no laws in New York against discriminating against homosexuals at the time, but the fact that the leaders of the organization are talking to the very conservative Mayor's gay assistant wraps this issue in irony. The assistant whose sexual orientation may have

predisposed him to be more sympathetic to the organization's plight affirms the status quo that it is not illegal to discriminate against homosexuals. The fact that the Mayor could easily discharge his assistant on the grounds of his sexual orientation further complicates the irony. NED WEEKS, true to his outspoken nature, pipes in:

NED: Have you told the mayor there's an epidemic going on?

HIRAM: I can't tell him that!

NED: Why not?

HIRAM: Because it isn't true.

BRUCE: Yes, sir, it is.

HIRAM: Who said so?

TOMMY: The government.

HIRAM: Which government? Our government?

NED: No! Russia's government.

HIRAM: Since when?

MICKEY: The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta declared it.

TOMMY: Seventeen months ago.

NED: How could you not know that?

HIRAM: Well, you can't expect us to concern ourselves with every little outbreak those boys come up with. (Kramer 87)

This government official - this gay government official - takes the party line when discussing issues that the mayor feels uncomfortable discussing. The mayor, being the premier elected official in New York City, relies upon the votes of the masses for election. Since the most prestigious newspaper in the city refuses to print news about the new virus, a vast majority of people in the city were unaware of the threat of AIDS. The Mayor's political future depended upon what the population wanted, or more importantly, what they did not want. The people of New York City did not want tourism to be affected by a small number (509) of cases of a virus that seemed to infect a small percentage of the population, especially after the city allocated \$150 million for a Swine Flu epidemic that did not occur (Kramer 35).

When NED threatens to send a hustler to Gracie Mansion to "talk" to the Mayor, HIRAM KEEBLER jumps in: "Now you listen to me! Of course we're aware of those figures" (Kramer 88). NED responds angrily,

Hiram here just said they're aware of the figures. And they're still not doing anything. I was worried before that they were just stupid and blind. Great! Now we get to worry about them being repressive and downright dangerous. (Kramer 88)

In the end, of course, the Mayor decides not to declare any

kind of emergency, and the organization is dismissed by the Mayor's assistant without receiving any help in finding office space.

The media is the third group Kramer targets in The Normal Heart. In most instances, the issues Kramer takes up with the medical establishment and the government are intricately tied together with the media. As in the example above, the Mayor refuses to acknowledge an AIDS crisis because he does not want to make it too much of a public issue: if the media hypes a potential epidemic in New York City, tourism falls and the city takes a fiscal hit. Even DR. BROOKNER's New England Journal of Medicine article sat unpublished for over a year, likely because, as she says, "Doctors . . . try to stay out of anything that smells political" (34).

At the beginning of the play, the only article to be published in the Times was on page twenty; it is ostensibly the "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" article. EMMA compares this lack of publicity to the publicity other health issues had received:

EMMA: . . . the Times ran something on some inside page. Very inside: page twenty. If you remember, Legionnaire's Disease, toxic-shock, they both hit the front page of the Times the minute

they happened. And stayed there until somebody did something. The front page of the Times has a way of inspiring action (Kramer 35).

The New York Times, one of the most prestigious newspapers in the world, has long been recognized as a means of making or breaking a person or a cause. However, NED notes that the Times is homophobic, refusing to use the word "gay" except in direct quotations. He compares the Times's refusal to recognize "gay" as euphemistic for "homosexual" to the way some people still call blacks "Negroes" (Kramer 35).⁶ NED later notes that Hitler's Final Solution for the Polish Jews during World War Two was first mentioned in the Times on page twenty-eight, long before the millions of Jews were ultimately murdered (Kramer 50). NED (and Kramer) parallels the disastrous inaction of the media and the government regarding the extermination of the Jews to the potential disaster inaction to resolve the AIDS crisis might become. His recognition of a political agenda in the media, in this case the New York Times, comes as no real surprise to NED, but as anger and frustration. His mission is to inform the gay men of New York about this new, insidious killer, and the best, most pervasive, and most trustworthy means of doing so, the Times, is fossilized.

The national media is also one of Kramer's targets in

The Normal Heart, though the mentions of any organizations or programs by name are few. The few times the organization has the opportunity to meet with the national media, usually the national media are being played against the New York Times or Mayor Koch. For example, after NED and the organization are meeting with the mayor's gay assistant, HIRAM KEEBLER, NED threatens to take the Mayor's brush-off to The Today Show, because he says, "Politicians understand only one thing - pressure! (Kramer 90-91).

The most interesting use of a specific media outlet comes when NED discusses his gender orientation with his straight brother, BEN. Although this discussion has nothing directly to do with AIDS, it does cut to the heart of the question of public perception of homosexuals and their behavior. On an end table in BEN's law office is a copy of Newsweek, with "Gay America" on the cover. The article inside features pictures of men in leather and chains with whips and black masks. Each man's occupation is given in the captions beneath the pictures. BEN says to NED,

BEN: I open magazines and I see pictures of you guys . . . and I say to myself, "This isn't Ned."

NED: No, it isn't. It isn't most of us. You know the media always dramatizes the most extreme. Do you think we all wear dresses, too?

BEN: Don't you? (Kramer 68)

NED states it clearly: "You know the media always dramatizes the most extreme." Extreme stories sell magazines and attract viewers to television news and talk shows. More importantly, BEN, NED's own brother, buys into the image that the media gives him. BEN does not say, "This isn't Ned" out of pride or knowledge; instead, he says it out of incredulity. He does not even know that his brother is not a cross dresser. The assumptions BEN makes about homosexuals in this scene are relatively harmless; he still has a relationship - an uncomfortable relationship, surely - with his gay brother. But to a person who may not be as "open-minded" as BEN, the media's image of homosexuals is disturbing. BEN's description of the article in Newsweek makes homosexuals out to be sexual predators and perverts whose Jekyll and Hyde alter-egos prompt distrust rather than acceptance.

People who know nothing about the unfolding drama of the AIDS crisis could read The Normal Heart to get a very real sense of the history of this plague. They would see the drama unfold during the period between July 1981 and May 1984 in New York City, essentially where the plague started. Kramer records international and domestic facts, statistics, political machinations, and the media's manipulation as

matters of history and art. Kramer passionately names the people he feels are culpable, and even the Times's Mel Gussow grudgingly concedes that "Mr. Kramer's play has a historical perspective both in its treatment of homosexuality and its attitude toward public policy" (qtd. in Shatzky 132).

As Is

While Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart emphasizes the politics and rhetoric of AIDS, William M. Hoffman's 1985 As Is stresses the personal and emotional effects of the syndrome ("Larry Kramer" 327). Unlike The Normal Heart, As Is spares the audience a documentary account of AIDS; instead, it dramatizes the relationship between RICH, a promising writer who contracts AIDS after leaving his long-time lover, SAUL, for a much younger man. Only RICH's and SAUL's characters are fully developed; the supporting cast provides a cross-section of American society that has been affected by AIDS in one way or another. Monologues by a HOSPICE WORKER, the conversations of two AIDS hotline workers, and the statements of several anonymous men and women who reveal "the first time I heard about it" are interspersed throughout the play as a sort of Brechtian social commentary on the crisis (Shatzky 350). Theater critic Don Shewey, who also edited Out Front: Contemporary

Gay and Lesbian Plays, wrote in the introduction to his 1988 anthology:

Unlike Larry Kramer's unremitting despondence in The Normal Heart, Hoffman manages - without denying the toll that AIDS has taken of being Pollyanna-ish about the prospects of facing a life-threatening disease [sic] for which there is no known cure - to insist that where there is life, there is hope. Popular with audiences on Broadway, Off Broadway, and on cable television, around the country and around the world, As Is is

the best play anyone has written yet about AIDS.

(xxv)

The play, which is not divided into acts or scenes, opens with RICH and SAUL dividing their possessions; they have been lovers for a long period of time, and now RICH has taken CHET, a much younger man, for a lover. Therefore, RICH and SAUL split their household much like a divorcing heterosexual couple. In fact, SAUL snidely comments to RICH: "A divorce is not final until the property settlement" (506). RICH is the one who wants the separation, but SAUL wants RICH to come back to him. SAUL loves RICH, but SAUL is also frightened of AIDS. In desperation, SAUL begs RICH:

SAUL: Don't go. Please. (*RICH sits. Long pause.*) I visited Teddy today at St. Vincent's. It's very depressing. . . . Harry has [Kaposi's sarcoma], and Matt has the swollen glands. . . . I haven't slept well for weeks. Every morning I examine my body for swellings, marks. I'm terrified of every pimple, every rash. If I cough I think of Teddy. I wish he would die. He *is* dead. He might as well be. Why can't he die? I feel the disease closing in on me. All my activities are life and death.

Keep up my Blue Cross. Up my reps. Eat my vegetables.

Sometimes I'm so scared I go back on my resolutions: I drink too much, and I smoke a joint, and I find myself at the bars and clubs, where I stand around and watch. They remind me of accounts of Europe during the Black Plague: coupling in the dark, dancing till you drop. The New Wave is the corpse look. I'm very frightened and I miss you. Say something, damn it. (*Beat.*)

RICH: I have it.

SAUL's fear of AIDS is understandable. He has witnessed a number of his friends dying from complications from AIDS,

and he recognizes that his behavior outside of his relationship with RICH is dangerous. Hoffman uses this and similar speeches throughout As Is as a means of disseminating information about AIDS as part of the plot. Unlike Kramer's polemical diatribe, Hoffman's information about AIDS is presented more in terms of personal fears and relational concern.

RICH's confession that he "has it" spurs a cacophony of speeches by various supporting characters who react to his infection. This Brechtian device causes the audience to understand the varying responses a person with AIDS gets from a wide range of people. Included in these overlapping speeches are two DOCTORS who identify RICH's swollen glands as a "Pre-AIDS Condition" and an "AIDS-related Complex," and then offer RICH experimental treatments; LILY, a close friend, wants to take care of RICH but is about to leave town for an extended period of time for work; CHET, LILY'S brother and RICH's current lover, who sleeps on the couch before he finally decides to leave RICH; RICH'S BROTHER, who refuses to touch RICH and will not even use his bathroom; RICH's catering PARTNER, who tries to explain to their clients that RICH does not touch the food; and SAUL, who puts on a mask of confidence (509-11). This cacophonous overlapping of speeches ends when RICH reaches out to CHET:

RICH: Chet, please, I need you!

(RICH tries to put his arms around CHET. Everyone except SAUL pulls back terrified.)

CHET, BROTHER, LILY, PARTNER, DOCTORS: Don't touch me! (511)

Bombarded with such negative reactions to RICH's status as a person with AIDS, the audience must feel sympathy for the character. He is ostracized, either intentionally or unintentionally, by virtually every person in every primary relationship in which he is involved. Marshall W. Mason, the producer of the original stage presentation, explains why in a production note:

The audience must be kept from feeling "safe" from this subject, so the actors of the "chorus" must act as a bridge between the fictional characters and the real theater event, and also as an unconventional kind of "threat" - keeping the audience aware that entertaining as the play may be, the subject is deadly. The desired effect is to assist the audience in a catharsis, as they are required to contemplate our common mortality.

(500)

Hoffman uses Brechtian alienation techniques for other purposes as well. Anonymous and frequent sexual encounters

were often the fare of homosexuals in the early eighties, so Hoffman recreates these scenes in flashback, to remind the audience both of the actual practice of this behavior and also of its dire consequences.

When SAUL invites RICH to live with him after CHET has left, RICH asks SAUL, "Where am I going to bring my tricks?" SAUL responds, "You pick up people?" to which RICH replies, "I go to bars . . . I pick up guys . . . but I give them a medical report before we leave . . ." (513). In the middle of RICH's line, the scene changes from SAUL's apartment to a bar, where RICH is now talking to PICKUP 1:

RICH: I should tell you something.

PICKUP 1: You like something kinky. Whips? Golden showers? Fist?

RICH: It's not like that. . . . I have a very mild case of lymphadenopathy.

PICKUP 1: What's that?

RICH: An AIDS-related condition.

PICKUP 1: Oh, shit.

RICH: Just the swollen glands -

PICKUP 1: No way. Uh-uh . . . Good luck . . . Oh, man . . . (513)

As PICKUP 1 leaves, the scene changes back to SAUL's apartment, and RICH says to SAUL, "So I stopped telling

them" (513). The scene shifts back to the bar a little later, with RICH talking to PICKUP 2, whom RICH tells he has a lover instead of admitting that he has AIDS. After the scene shifts to SAUL's apartment and flashes back again to the bar, we see RICH with CLONE 1, CLONE 2, and CLONE 3. While the three CLONES offer each other a variety of sexual experiences, RICH's speaks of AIDS:

RICH: Poor bastards that got it; cancer, pneumonia, herpes all over. I mean, I'd kill myself if I had to go through all that shit. Get a gun and perform fellatio on it. . . . Slash my wrists with the grain. . . . Subway tracks? . . . Or maybe I'd mix myself a Judy Garland: forty reds and a quart of vodka. (516-17)

The dramatic irony of these scenes shifting without pause or scenic changes - the audience knows in present time that RICH has AIDS and that the audience sees in flashback RICH's reckless behavior - is an effective way to conflate time and space so that the audience must see all events in relation to RICH's AIDS crisis.

The most effective use of overlapping speeches comes in the middle of one of SAUL's monologues. SAUL and RICH are reminiscing about their life together, before the breakup and before AIDS. SAUL says, "I was at the St. Mark's baths

soaking in the hot tub when I first heard about AIDS. It was how many years ago? My friend Brian - remember him? - was soaking, too, and he told me about a mutual friend who had died the week before. It was 'bizarre,' he said . . ."

(522). SAUL's words break off as a small group takes the front of the stage, each member talking quietly about the first time he or she had heard of AIDS. Four men and two women tell their stories about the first time they had met someone with AIDS. One man had heard that one of his friends had died from AIDS from the friend's mother; one woman's boss returned from the hospital forty-five pounds lighter as a result of AIDS; another woman got a phone call from her son's doctor telling her that he had AIDS; a second man read about AIDS in the newspaper, while a third man, a police officer, learned about AIDS when a person with AIDS was transferred to his unit. A fourth man mentions that he went to a friend's memorial service on the set of Oh, Calcutta! and wonders how many memorial services he had been to. The group exits after they speak the names of many of their friends and relations who have died from AIDS (522-24).

Once the group has left, SAUL's monologue is continued, ". . . and he told me about a mutual friend who had died the week before. It was 'bizarre,' he said. Brian died last week

of the same thing" (524). In this quick moment in time, between SAUL's words, the audience sees how diverse the people affected by AIDS are.

At one point in the play, the lights come up on the first staged AIDS support group at work. Members of this support group are diverse, and their stories about AIDS are equally disparate. Like the people who reveal the first time they had ever heard about AIDS, the people in the support group represent a fairly diverse population, including a pregnant housewife. Each member of the support group tells his own story about AIDS, but more of them than not are in denial about having the syndrome. PWA 1 claims to have been in a monogamous relationship and was surprised to find himself infected. PWA 4, a pregnant housewife, got infected by her husband, a heroin-injecting policeman. PWA 5 exclaims that "Gay was grim. It was something I did because I had to. Like a dope fiend needs his fix. It always left me feeling like shit afterward. And that's the truth. I felt guilty. I still feel that way" (531). PWA 2 is a flamboyant gay man who was asked to leave his team of scientists working in robotics: "My co-workers asked me to leave. They were afraid of contracting AIDS through the air, or by my looking at them. You see, they are scientists" (531).

RICH finally speaks in the group. He tells his

colleagues that he feels the disease disappearing in him, and that "If I *really* thought that I was coming down with it . . . We all have *options*" (532), at which point the scene shifts from the support group back to SAUL's apartment. RICH's thought is towards suicide as a means of escaping his status as person with AIDS. Later in the play, after RICH has collapsed and has been admitted to the hospital, he begs SAUL to find him enough Seconal to kill himself:

SAUL: No! I won't do it!

. . . .

RICH: If you love me, you'll help me. I have something that's eating me up. I don't want to go on. I'm scared to go on. (540-41)

The suicide/death wish is familiar in AIDS plays. Night Sweat, discussed earlier in this chapter, offers suicide a la carte as an alternative to dying from AIDS. The faint glimmer of hope in Night Sweat is overpowered by the oppressiveness of The Experience! However, RICH's suicidal impulse in As Is is easily eclipsed by SAUL's imperative for him to live and become once again his lover.

Throughout the play, SAUL makes clear that he wants RICH back as his lover. When the two are splitting their common property at the beginning of the play, SAUL admits to RICH that he has feelings for him (508). Almost everyone

deserts RICH because he has AIDS, but not SAUL:

RICH: My lover leaves me; my family won't let me near them; I lose my business; I can't pay my rent. How the fuck do you think I feel?

SAUL: You'll stay here with me.

RICH: Till death do us part.

SAUL: I love you. (514)

After a couple of flashbacks, SAUL and RICH start talking dirty to each other. They begin to reminisce about the "good ol' days" of sleaze and promiscuous sex.

RICH: Not "promiscuous," Saul, nondirective, noncommitted, nonauthoritarian -

SAUL: Free, wild, rampant. . . . Juicy, funky, hunky -

RICH: Sex.

SAUL: Sex. God, I miss it. (*RICH lowers his eyes. SAUL nods and goes to RICH. He takes RICH's face in both hands and tries to kiss him square on the mouth. RICH pulls away frantically.*)

RICH: NO!

SAUL: It's safe!

RICH: You don't know what you're doing! (520)

RICH declines SAUL's kiss because he fears the possibility of infecting SAUL, not because he does not love SAUL. The

denied kiss leads into SAUL and RICH remembering fondly the days when they were together, going on photo shoots and enjoying their daily routine together.

SAUL obeys RICH's desire and obtains enough pills for RICH to kill himself with, but instead of buying enough for one, he buys enough so that they can both die (546). However, on the way back to the hospital, SAUL throws the pills away. When he tells RICH what he has done, RICH demands an explanation. The only thing SAUL can tell RICH is, "Let me help you live!" (547).

SAUL tells RICH that while he was walking back to the hospital, he realized that he does not "have the right to take your life or mine" (548). SAUL insists that he needs RICH, and in doing so, he utters the title line of the play:

SAUL: Maybe I'm being selfish, but I want you here. I need you.

RICH: My future isn't exactly promising.

SAUL: I'll take you as is.

RICH: But what happens when it gets worse? It's gonna get worse.

SAUL: I'll be here for you no matter what happens.

RICH: Will you?

SAUL: I promise. (548)

SAUL takes the first step of acceptance in his relationship with RICH. RICH responds to SAUL's proposal seriously:

RICH: Do you promise to stick with me no matter what happens?

SAUL: I do.

RICH: Do You? (He searches SAUL's face for the answer.) I need you. (549)

RICH had offered SAUL every opportunity to be free of him. It is SAUL's option not to be involved with a person whose life is dominated by AIDS, but it is his choice to be involved with the person *as is*; he chooses not to engage primarily the syndrome that has infected RICH's body. SAUL is RICH's salvation, literally and figuratively. SAUL saves RICH from killing himself, but more importantly he saves him from living the remainder of his life alone, unloved.

In the end, SAUL and RICH are reunited, although RICH is hospital bound. Even still, RICH and SAUL are so much in love that they make love in the hospital bed. Hoffman is careful to have RICH suggest using precautions, and RICH and SAUL disappear behind a hospital curtain, together again.

As Is is frequently viewed as a nostalgic play (Roman 60), with frequent flashbacks and memories of both RICH and SAUL of an exciting and pleasurable life before AIDS. It is

"not only a play about coming to terms with disease and with one's love for a partner but also a play about coming to terms with one's past without guilt or regret" (Clum 70). It hardly parallels the damning jeremiad of Kramer's The Normal Heart, and it easily overpowers the cynicism of Chesley's Night Sweat. SAUL and RICH's love-making at the end of the play represents "the triumph of desire, now qualified and modified, in the new world" (Clum, Acting Gay 70-71).

NOTES

¹ In no way am I trying to suggest that disco is exclusively homosexual, nor do I suggest that gay sex clubs are necessarily the direct antecedents of disco clubs; however, I am willing to suggest that the lifestyle propagated in the lyrics of disco music is very much in line with the urban homosexual movement in America in the seventies and eighties. Some titles of disco songs that are suggestive of homosexuality include ABBA's 1976 "Dancing Queen" ("queen" is slang for homosexuals, especially "drag queen"); The Village People's 1978 "Macho Man" (which ironically glorifies masculinity) and "Y.M.C.A." (which parallels the bathhouses, where gay men stay overnight "with all the boys"); Gloria Gaynor's 1978 "I Will Survive" (about a person who is alone but discovers self-determination - a very important idea in the gay seventies); Sister Sledge's 1979 "We Are Family" (to be "family" is to be in the homosexual community); Diana Ross's 1980 "I'm Coming Out" (to "come out" is to admit openly one's homosexuality); and in 1982, the Weather Girls performed "It's Raining Men" (according to the lyrics, men of every type fall from the sky, and the singers have their umbrellas upside down to catch as many as possible), the last disco hit (Abreu).

² Three other theatrical works were also produced before or

concurrently with Night Sweat: "One," by Jeff Hagedorn is a thirty-minute monologue depicting a man with AIDS. "One" opened on August 14, 1983, in a Chicago gay bar. It is credited with creating the idea of an "AIDS theatre" (Roman 45). "Warren," by Rebecca Ranson, opened in September 1984; it shows the reactions of the friends and family members of a man with AIDS (Roman 49). A group of San Francisco theater artists called Artists Involved with Death and Survival presented a workshop of "The A.I.D.S. Show" at Theater Rhinoceros on September 6, 1984. "The A.I.D.S. Show" was a compilation of skits and songs by thirteen gay men and lesbians who tried to present AIDS from multiple points of view (Roman 45).

³ Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a homosexual American poet whose poems Song of Myself and I Sing the Body Electric celebrate the beauty of the physical body, the importance of physical health, and the joy of sexuality. The poems in Leaves of Grass encourage Americans to be large and generous in spirit and urge them to nurture themselves in political liberty. Whitman's theme of the inherent value of individuals and their importance in American life is a cornerstone of gay rights issues.

⁴ Erica Jong, one of the voices of women's sexual liberation, calls this kind of nameless sexual fantasy a

"zipless fuck": "For the true, ultimate, zipless A-1 fuck . . . you never got to know the man very well. . . . So another condition for the zipless fuck was brevity. And anonymity made it even better" (12).

⁵ The amount of critical coverage these two works, and all the works in this study except Tony Kushner's Angels in America, have received is quite limited. Reviews of play performances, occasional articles, and a small number of books address the plays themselves. They get occasional mentions in studies of homosexual culture and AIDS. There is nearly no "literary" criticism of these works; it is all "drama" or "theatrical" criticism.

⁶ What minorities call themselves evolves over time, paralleling the minority groups' evolving self-definition and self-image. For example, the current terms for Americans of African heritage are "African-Americans" or "blacks." In the 1970s and 1980s, the term "Afro-Americans" was popular, before that the word "Negro" was common, and "Negro" replaced the term "colored." Similarly, the preferred term for homosexual men has evolved, especially since the 1969 Stonewall rebellion. "Homosexual" is a clinical, impersonal term used primarily by other groups to identify men of same-gender orientation, whereas "gay" and "queer," when used by gay men for self-identification, are more positive terms. Of

course, when anyone uses an appellation in a derogatory way, the term takes on negative connotations. When the Times refused to use the appellation that homosexual men preferred, the newspaper disempowered the minority group by refusing to acknowledge its progress in self-determination.

CHAPTER 3

THE EFFECT OF AIDS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Thinking of friends afraid to shake your hand,
we think of your hand shaking, your mouth set,
your eyes drained of any reprimand.

Loving, we kissed you, partly to persuade
both you and us, seeing what eyes had said,
that we were loving and were not afraid.

If we had had more, we would have given more.
As it was we stood next to your bed,
stopping, though, to set our smiles at the door.
Miller Williams - "Thinking About Bill, Dead of AIDS"

In 1987 Larry Kramer, author of The Normal Heart discussed earlier, founded ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), the direct action AIDS activist organization that often uses camp humor¹ as a means of achieving political action (Andriote 218). Similarly, although "AIDS plays in the mid-eighties gathered people into the space of performance to counter the mystification of AIDS in the popular imagination" (Roman 68) by retelling the facts about AIDS theatrically, in the late eighties and early nineties AIDS was frequently represented on the American stage by the use of camp. These camp performances, including Robert Patrick's 1987 one-act play "Pouf Positive" and especially John Epperson as Lypsinka in the one-person show I Could Go On Lip-Synching (1991),² provided a sort of reprieve both

from the closet and from the horrifying plague that seemed to attack the homosexual community in particular (Roman 98).

In 1991, the Sodomy Players presented its extremely campy AIDS! The Musical!, for which the promotional slogan was, "You've had the disease, you've been to the demonstration, now see the musical!" (qtd. in Roman 104). The political agenda behind the play - that any attention given to AIDS helps fight the syndrome - is boosted by the campiness of the performance. A major element of camp is incongruity, and the wild humor of AIDS! The Musical! is certainly incongruous with its vile subject matter. AIDS! The Musical! "accommodate[s] both entertainment and activism" (Roman 106), challenging the dominant discourse propagated by the media, the medical establishment, and the government, just as its predecessors had before it.

The main character of AIDS! The Musical! is THOMAS, who loses his lover, BOB, to AIDS in the first few moments of the play. The remainder of the play highlights THOMAS, who lives with AIDS, and his emotional, spiritual, and political growth as he drifts through the vagaries of contemporary gay culture. The authors, Wendell Jones and David Stanley, deliberately concentrate the focus on the person living with AIDS and his interpersonal relationships rather than

the tragedy of a person dying from AIDS (Roman 106).

Like AIDS! The Musical!, most of the significant AIDS plays of the late 1980's and the early to mid 1990's probe the effects the death of a person with AIDS has on the surviving relatives, friends, and lovers. Terrence McNally, one of Broadway's most prolific playwrights, investigates how the families of two gay men who died from AIDS cope with the deaths in the serious vignette "Andre's Mother" (1988) and in Lips Together, Teeth Apart (1991). Other significant plays more germane to this study explore love relationships between gay men where either one or both have AIDS or HIV. The humorous Jeffrey (1992), by Paul Rudnick, features a gay man who vows to become celibate because he is afraid of contracting AIDS, but he falls in love with an HIV-positive man. Finally, Terrence McNally's Love! Valour! Compassion! (1994) charts the sometimes campy relationships of eight gay men, two of whom have AIDS and fall in love.

"Andre's Mother"

McNally's "Andre's Mother" is a short scene set in New York City's Central Park. Four people - CAL (Andre's surviving lover), ARTHUR and PENNY (Cal's father and sister), and ANDRE'S MOTHER - stand in the park, holding white helium-filled balloons. CAL explains to the other characters that the white balloons symbolize Andre's soul,

and when they let go of the balloons, Andre's soul will be released to heaven. ARTHUR and PENNY release their balloons after saying their good-byes, and they exit the scene, leaving only CAL and ANDRE'S MOTHER. ARTHUR and PENNY represent the accepting and caring network of supporters that CAL and Andre could rely upon.

Only CAL speaks for the rest of the scene, while ANDRE'S MOTHER remains unresponsive to his words. He says to his lover's grieving mother that he had hoped they would be friends someday, "but [she] didn't know about Andre and me" (McNally, "Andre's Mother" 1780). Andre had not told his mother about CAL, because "he was so afraid of hurting [her] and of [her] disapproval" (1780). These words imply that Andre had no confidence in coming out to his mother, either because she would actually reject him or because he was afraid she would. CAL reveals that Andre was from a rural community, so perhaps ANDRE'S MOTHER is socially conservative and unaccepting of her son's homosexuality. CAL implies as much when he tells ANDRE'S MOTHER that her son's home, New York City, is "a city of fugitives from our parents' scorn or heartbreak" (1780). CAL explains to ANDRE'S MOTHER that she is like Lulu's mother in the comic strip Little Lulu, who is so remote that the cartoon characters refer to her only as "Lulu's Mother," hence the

name of this vignette. This explanation further characterizes ANDRE'S MOTHER as remote and formidable. Significantly, CAL attributes Andre's reluctance to talk to his mother - and her reluctance to talk to her son - to Andre's homosexuality, not his status as a person with AIDS.

The reader does not know for sure if ANDRE'S MOTHER knows her son died from AIDS, but CAL tells her:

CAL: Andre died of AIDS. I don't know how he got it. I tested negative. He died bravely. You would have been proud of him. The only thing that frightened him was you. (1780)

At the end of his speech, CAL tells ANDRE'S MOTHER that he is bitter. He tells her, "I can't reach you. I'm beginning to feel your disapproval and it's making me ill" (1780). CAL kisses his helium balloon, releases it to the heavens, and exits. All that remains of the vignette are stage directions:

(ANDRE'S MOTHER stands alone holding her white balloon. Her lips tremble. She looks on the verge of breaking down. She is about to let go of the balloon when she pulls it down to her. She looks at it awhile before she gently kisses it. She lets go of the balloon. She follows it with her eyes as it rises and rises. The lights are beginning to

*fade. ANDRE'S MOTHER's eyes are still on the
balloon. The lights fade.) (1780 s.d.)*

Filled with regret and sadness, ANDRE'S MOTHER finally realizes that her love for her son eclipses the difficulty she may have had in accepting her son's gender orientation. Unfortunately, she realizes it too late; Andre is already gone.

The conflict between Andre and his mother does not rest solely upon her shoulders. Andre himself apparently dismissed the possibility of telling his mother about his homosexuality; he is one of those who moved to New York and did not confide in her. McNally's lessons in this vignette are directed both to the gay community and their family and friends: they should trust their family members to accept and support them. CAL's father and sister are examples of acceptance, even though they may have their differences with CAL. ARTHUR comments that sometimes CAL "isn't always like a son to [him]" and that Andre had helped him to get to know

Cal (1779). Nevertheless, ARTHUR loves and supports CAL, as ANDRE'S MOTHER does not.

Lips Together, Teeth Apart

Another of McNally's relationship plays is Lips Together, Teeth Apart (1991), a story about two married

couples, JOHN and CHLOE HADDOCK and SAM and SALLY TRUMAN, who are spending the Fourth of July weekend on Fire Island in the home left to SALLY by her brother David, who has died of AIDS. AIDS is not the primary focus of this play, as it has been in the other plays in this study. Instead, the principal action centers around the homophobia and dysfunctional relationships among the married couples - SALLY and JOHN have had an affair; SALLY may be pregnant but is hesitant to tell her husband because she has had so many miscarriages; CHLOE, the diva of her local community theater, is in her own show tune-induced haze; JOHN has cancer but no one pays attention to his announcement of this condition, and SAM is feeling the angst of a mid-life crisis. John Clum writes: "Lips Together, Teeth Apart is among the few plays that dramatize powerfully the causes and effects of homophobia" (Clum, "Dramatic" 206).

SALLY's brother David died of AIDS before the action of the play begins. The two couples are visiting SALLY's new Fire Island home for the Fourth of July weekend, and during this visit they reveal their homophobia and unfounded fear of AIDS. Their fears and prejudices are representative of those the dominant discourse espouses.

Accepting and embracing homosexuals, whether at the workplace, social settings, or family gatherings is

difficult for all of the characters. The men mouth the more obvious prejudices: SAM and JOHN are nervous about being nude, because they are on Fire Island, a gay resort area (10), and both men become nervous when their gay neighbors wave hello, because the neighbors may think "we [are] queer" (13).

At one point, the neighbors play their music too loudly, and JOHN comments to SAM that permanent neighbors "like that" would be a problem. Later, JOHN comments:

JOHN: (*low*): Goddamn fairies.

CHLOE: We didn't hear that. (*To the others:*) He doesn't mean it. We have three gay men and one lesbian in administration at Sturman. God only knows how many on faculty. One of the men in admissions right under John has AIDS. John has been terrific about it. (28-29)

When CHLOE hushes JOHN's comment, then explains how open-minded JOHN is about homosexuals and persons with AIDS, she inadvertently reveals the depth of JOHN's, and her own, prejudice. Clearly JOHN superficially accepts homosexuals and PWA's because it is the "politically correct" thing to do. Otherwise, he would not diminish his acceptance of these people with gender slurs and paranoia. CHLOE refuses to

correct her husband's intolerance. She does not rebuke him or viciously defend the "goddamn fairies" comment; rather, she covers up the prejudice by touting what should be tolerance, but what is likely administrative tolerance imposed upon JOHN by his superiors.

SALLY and CHLOE appear to be more tolerant of homosexuality and more accepting of PWAs than their husbands. CHLOE claims, "I'm totally comfortable here, but then of course I'm in the theatre" (47). Her sister-in-law SALLY is sensitive to the fact that this was her brother David's house and that David's lover, Aaron, might have an emotional investment in the home. SALLY feels guilty for going through household closets, because Aaron apparently had not inventoried the contents (16).

SALLY feels conflicted when thinking about what to do with the house:

JOHN: What are you thinking about the house?

SALLY: I don't know. It's so far for us. I don't know how we'd use it. Part of me thinks I should just give it to Aaron. . . .

JOHN: Why would you give something worth maybe close to a million dollars to a total stranger?

SALLY: He's not a total stranger. . . . He was

wonderful to David. He took extraordinary care of him. Never left his side - slept in the hospital - everything one person can possibly do for another. . . . There should be some way to acknowledge that kind of devotion. (45-46)

SALLY understands how devoted Aaron was to David. He took care of his lover as a legally-married spouse would have; Aaron shows David far more spousal concern than any of the four characters in the play show for each other, and SALLY embraces this relationship in her heart, likely because she appreciates Aaron's bearing the task, relieving her of the responsibility.

The four characters confront AIDS head-on at the end of the play. Throughout the play, the characters have thrown about occasional banter about the swimming pool. No one has been swimming for various reasons - CHLOE is allergic to chlorine, the others joke about not swimming after eating - though they do dangle their feet in the water. After everyone makes lame excuses for not going into the pool, SALLY finally retorts:

SALLY: None of us are ever going to go into that pool, so can we just stop talking about it? . . . We all think it's infected. We all think it's polluted. We all think we'll get AIDS and die if

we go in. . . . One drop of water in your mouth or on an open sore and we'll be infected with my brother and his black lover and God knows who else was in here. Pissing, ejaculating. I think we're very brave to dangle our feet like this. They may fall off. (81)

SALLY splashes JOHN, then drinks the pool water from the palm of her hand: "Then let's all get AIDS and die!" she says (81). She kisses SAM long and hard on the mouth:

(She kisses him again. He pulls away from her and tries to clear his mouth. Clearly, he is not comfortable with the thought of the taste of her mouth in his. He gets up from the edge of the pool.)

SAM: Stop that! I don't want to kiss you. I'm sorry your brother died, but it's not my fault. I didn't kill him. I don't know about pools and AIDS and homosexuals. I don't want to. It frightens me, all right? All of this! I'm sorry, I can't help it, it's who I am. Excuse me. (82)

SAM's admission that he does not know anything about AIDS and homosexuality and the possibility of contracting AIDS by using a pool after a PWA is important. SAM is a product of the dominant discourse; he reads his morning newspaper, he

watches television, and he buys into the propaganda that AIDS is a homosexual disease. Like other diseases, SAM thinks, AIDS may be transmissible by casual contact, despite all evidence and argument to the contrary.

The reaction of family and heterosexual friends to AIDS in American dramatic production is as varied as it is in real life. Some people are supportive and comforting, as Cal's family was in "Andre's Mother," while others are unaccepting and sometimes even hostile, as JOHN sometimes appears in Lips Together, Teeth Apart. The utter denial that a friend or family member has AIDS, a common reaction that partially stems from the denial that the person is or was homosexual, is eloquently characterized in ANDRE'S MOTHER.

The characterization of homosexual friends' reactions to persons with AIDS is significantly different than those reactions by heterosexual people. The task of having to accept both homosexuality and AIDS is burdensome for heterosexual friends and family. These people must come to terms first with their friend's homosexuality, which is perceived negatively by the public at large as a result of negative stereotyping by tradition, organized religion, and the media. Getting in the way of handling or understanding AIDS is the dominant discourse judgment that AIDS is either a punishment handed down by a wrathful God or that it is

somehow self-inflicted.

When a person with AIDS is surrounded by homosexual friends, this first step is unnecessary; the gay friends have dealt with these issues themselves. The focus is immediately on handling AIDS and its complications. The death of a person with AIDS is no easier for his or her homosexual friends than it is for their heterosexual counterparts, but the prejudices that defame homosexuals are absent.³

The remaining two plays for discussion in this chapter deal with AIDS as it affects groups of homosexual friends. Paul Rudnick's 1992 Jeffrey retells the humorous adventure of the title character in his feeble attempt at celibacy as a means of preventing infection. JEFFREY quickly meets and falls in love with the handsome, strong STEVE, who is HIV-positive. A third Terrence McNally play, Love! Valour! Compassion! (1994), portrays eight gay men who vacation together three times during one summer. During the first gathering, the audience learns that BUZZ has AIDS; during the second, BUZZ meets JAMES, another PWA; and during the third vacation, BUZZ and JAMES become lovers.

Jeffrey

Paul Rudnick's 1992 hilarious comedy Jeffrey opens with the title character and another man making love in half-

light. Their passions are interrupted when the condom breaks. The man turns away from JEFFREY, and he is replaced by a series of men who emerge out from under the covers, "(. . . in the manner of clowns piling out of a tiny circus car)" (Rudnick 2 s.d.). Each potential lover becomes more insistent on increasingly drastic measures of safe sex to the point of ridiculousness, when the final man who wraps himself in Saran Wrap from head to toe, wearing surgical gloves and a surgical mask, makes JEFFREY stand across the room and screams in panic when JEFFREY looks at him (4-5).

The scene changes, and JEFFREY stands before the audience, addressing them:

I love sex. I don't know how else to say it. I always have -- I always thought that sex was the reason to grow up. I couldn't wait! I didn't! I mean -- sex! It's just one of the truly great ideas. I mean, the fact that our bodies have this built-in capacity for joy -- it just makes me love God. Yes! . . . Except -- what's going on? I mean, you saw. Sex is too sacred to be treated this way. Sex wasn't meant to be safe, or negotiated, or fatal. . . . So. Enough. Facts of life. No more sex. Not for me. Done! (7).

JEFFREY's declaration of "No more sex" sets up the initial dramatic tension of the play: Can a gay man in the nineties, who admits to having slept with over five thousand men (7), successfully give up having sex? (Roman 242). While it initially appears that JEFFREY renounces sex because he is afraid of contracting AIDS, it seems that the real problem JEFFREY has is with the negotiations of safer sex, as discovered in the opening scene.

JEFFREY's Lysistrata-like commitment to his celibacy is challenged immediately when he meets STEVE, a "*good-looking, extremely sexual man*" (8 *s.d.*) at the gym, where JEFFREY thinks he will redirect his sex drive into working on physical fitness. STEVE flirts with JEFFREY, and he kisses him passionately. JEFFREY flees, and the next scene shows JEFFREY talking to his friend STERLING.

When JEFFREY tells STERLING of his plan to give up sex, STERLING replies, "My dear, what you need is a relationship. . . . If you had a boyfriend, you could relax. You'd set the rules once and then you'd be fine. That's what Darius and I did, and we've been together for almost two years" (13). Later during the same conversation, JEFFREY asks about DARIUS, and STERLING tells him that DARIUS is fine, after having a reaction to AZT, a drug commonly prescribed to deter AIDS. JEFFREY asks, "An you still have sex?" to which

STERLING replies, "Of course. Safe sex. The best" (15).

The audience does not know STERLING's HIV status; however, his endorsement of safer sex suggests that he may be free of HIV. If this is true, and it is a reasonable supposition, then STERLING and DARIUS represents an existing serodiscordant couple who happily engage in sexual relations.

JEFFREY meets STEVE again when they both work to cater "A Hoedown for AIDS" at the Waldorf, where STEVE is dressed as a cowboy and JEFFREY an Indian. STEVE pursues JEFFREY again, square dancing and serving drinks to the party guests, to no avail.

The scene cuts to STERLING and DARIUS's apartment, where JEFFREY raves about how good-looking and interesting STEVE is, when the doorbell rings. At the door is STEVE, JEFFREY's blind date set up by STERLING. JEFFREY tells STEVE:

Steve - since the first second I saw you, at the gym, I have thought of nothing and no one else. I have fantasized about you - naked - about you kissing me and talking to me and walking down the street with me, and letting you do things to me. . . . I think you could change my life and change the world and I would love more than anything to

do exactly the same for you and I think it's completely and totally possible that we could be the happiest people alive except - I'm not having sex anymore so - sorry! (31)

STERLING, DARIUS, and STEVE all convince JEFFREY that he should go on a date with STEVE, and JEFFREY finally gives in to them. After they make the date, STEVE tells JEFFREY:

STEVE: I just . . . okay, just so there are no surprises . . .

JEFFREY: Uh-huh.

STEVE: I'm HIV-positive.

JEFFREY (*after a beat*): Um, okay, right.

STEVE: Does that make a difference?

JEFFREY: No. No. Of course not.

STERLING (*dismissing any doubt*): Please.

DARIUS: HIV-positive men are the hottest. (33)

At this point, "the dramatic device of the HIV-positive disclosure standard in AIDS plays, sets up the [primary] dramatic tension of the play: AIDS as love's obstacle" according to David Roman.

JEFFREY calls STEVE and cancels their date. Afterwards, JEFFREY turns to the audience and says

I know what you're thinking. What a sleazoid, what

a major-league, hall-of-fame rat. And maybe you're right. It's just . . . okay, what am I so afraid of? Him getting sick? Me getting sick? (39)

JEFFREY sees AIDS as the primary obstacle blocking any relationships, with STEVE or anyone else. However, STERLING and DARIUS and other secondary characters throughout the play endorse safer sex as a means of preventing HIV infection. Logically, JEFFREY should embrace safer sex as a means of attaining a relationship in spite of AIDS; however, sexual matters are rarely logical. JEFFREY's confusion and refusal to negotiate safer sex practices place him outside the norm of the gay social belief systems in the play (Roman 244).

STEVE operates within the gay social norm operative in the play. He subscribes to safer sex, and he tempts JEFFREY: "There's lots of things we could do. Safe things. Hot things" (46). JEFFREY rejects STEVE once again. STEVE replies:

Can I do something, say something, that will let this happen? I want you, Jeffrey. I may very well even love you. And that means nothing? That should beat anything. That should win! . . . why are you the one with the problem? Why do I get to be both sick and begging? (47)

STEVE's character bears the responsibility of educating the audience and JEFFREY about safer sex and the possibility of happiness in a serodiscordant couple (Roman 245). However, JEFFREY is unteachable. He apologizes to STEVE, then explodes, "I hate sex! I hate love! I hate the world for giving me everything, and then taking it all back!" (48).

STEVE and JEFFREY meet once more at a clinic where JEFFREY is to get a blood test. STEVE mocks a fashion show coordinator, describing hospital gowns and other medical appurtenances with a haughty, agile voice. JEFFREY tells STEVE that he admires his spirit, to which STEVE, who is tired of the chase, snaps

Don't admire me! Fuck me! Admiration gets me an empty dance card, except for the chest X-rays and the occasional march on Washington. Admiration gets me a lovely memorial and a square on the quilt! (60)

STEVE does all he can to get JEFFREY to realize that he is a living, breathing man with desires and passions, and that sex with him can be safe. JEFFREY desperately seeks support for his new celibacy from a variety of sources, including his parents, who suggest that he try masturbation, pornography, and phone sex as a means of relief.

JEFFREY also goes to see a priest for help. FATHER DAN

is a campy musical theater fanatic⁴ who quickly puts the moves on JEFFREY. While kneeling and praying, JEFFREY feels FATHER DAN put his hand on his butt, and afterwards, he follows FATHER DAN into the cathedral store-room where the priest tells him, "I'm a Catholic priest. Historically, that's somewhere in between chorus boy and florist" (66).

JEFFREY tells FATHER DAN that DARIUS collapsed during intermission of The Nutcracker, because he was so dehydrated from "some fucking AIDS drug." JEFFREY explodes

Why did He do this? Why did God make the world this way, and why do I have to live in it? You're a priest - you have to tell me! Don't you? (66-67)

FATHER DAN, in his garish way, explains that most gay men get their concept of God from the album cover of My Fair Lady, that features a "caricature of George Bernard Shaw up in the clouds, manipulating Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews on strings, like marionettes" (67). He continues:

FATHER DAN: Darling, my darling - have you ever been to a picnic? And someone blows up a balloon, and everyone starts tossing it around? And the balloon drifts and it catches the light, and it's always just about to touch the ground, but someone always gets there just in time, to tap it back up.

That balloon - that's God. The very best in all of us. The kindness. The heavy petting. The eleven o'clock numbers. (69)

FATHER DAN's balloon metaphor is interesting. As noted earlier in this chapter, Terrence McNally has the characters in "Andre's Mother" release balloons to symbolize the release of Andre's soul to heaven. Similarly, Rudnick's gay priest refers to the balloon as God, suggesting that the balloon somehow captures the *anima*, or breath of life.

FATHER DAN's metaphorical balloon is more light-hearted than ANDRE'S MOTHER's though, because he implies that the God-balloon represents a festive spirit. God in the metaphorical form of a balloon is "the very best in all of us" to the campy priest, suggesting that even traditionally "sinful" activities like "heavy petting" are part of God because these things make life enjoyable and fun.

JEFFREY responds to FATHER DAN,

JEFFREY: But what about the bad stuff? When the balloon does hit the ground, when it bursts?

FATHER DAN: Who cares? Evil bores me. It's one-note. It doesn't sing. Of course life sucks; it always will - so why not make the most of it? How dare you not lunge for any shred of happiness?

JEFFREY: With Steve, who's sick? Who I'm afraid to touch?

FATHER DAN: So maybe you need a rubber or a surgical mask or a roll of Saran Wrap! But how dare you give up sex, when there are children in Europe who can't get a date! There is only one real blasphemy - the refusal of joy! Of a corsage and a kiss! (69)

Despite FATHER DAN's encouragement for him to seize the day and pursue a relationship with STEVE, JEFFREY remains unconvinced. He decides to move back to Wisconsin, where he thinks he will not have to face these kinds of difficult decisions.

When DARIUS dies, STERLING almost tells JEFFREY that he hates him. STERLING asks JEFFREY to leave, because he cannot face him:

STERLING: Please go. You are not part of this.

This has nothing to do with you. You know, Darius said he thought you were the saddest person he ever knew.

JEFFREY (*stunned*): Why did he say that?

STERLING: Because he was sick. He had a fatal disease. And he was one million times happier than you.

JEFFREY (*after a beat*): You loved Darius. And look what happens. Do you want me to go through this? With Steve?

STERLING: Yes. (83)

Of course STERLING does not want JEFFREY to suffer the loss of his lover, and certainly he does not wish for STEVE to die. What STERLING wants, and what the sympathetic audience/reader wants, is for JEFFREY to live happily and experience the love that STEVE can offer him, and they have STERLING and DARIUS to serve as the model of a happy serodiscordant couple.

DARIUS appears to JEFFREY at DARIUS's wake. He appears to JEFFREY to finish the pedagogical work that STEVE had started, to teach JEFFREY that he must accept and live beyond AIDS. The scene unfolds:

DARIUS: Jeffrey, I'm dead. You're not.

JEFFREY: I know that.

DARIUS: Do you? Prove it.

JEFFREY: What do you mean?

DARIUS: Go dancing. Go to a show. Make trouble. Make out. Hate AIDS, Jeffrey. Not life.

JEFFREY: How?

DARIUS: Just think of AIDS as . . . the guest that won't leave. The one we all hate. But you have to remember.

JEFFREY: What?

DARIUS: Hey - it's still our party. (84)

The play closes with STEVE and JEFFREY on top of the Empire State Building. JEFFREY had left a message for STEVE to meet him there. JEFFREY has a red balloon. JEFFREY asks STEVE, "Could we have sex? Safe sex? Some kind of sex?" (86). STEVE reminds JEFFREY once again that he is HIV-positive, and JEFFREY declares he knows and will not go away,

JEFFREY: Because I'm a gay man. And I live in New York. And I'm not an innocent bystander. Not anymore. (87)

The play closes with JEFFREY and STEVE tossing the red balloon to each other. The balloon reminds the audience of the balloon FATHER DAN told JEFFREY about earlier, the balloon that represents the "best in all of us." The lights dim as JEFFREY and STEVE embrace and kiss with the balloon held between them. David Roman suggests that the balloon not only represents FATHER DAN's idea, but also that it suggests a prophylactic, protecting JEFFREY from STEVE's HIV (246).

Love! Valour! Compassion!

Terrence McNally "provides a glimpse into the ways that HIV-negative gay men interact with one another and with gay men living with HIV" (Roman 249) in his 1994 tour de force, Love! Valour! Compassion!, although two of the characters suffer from AIDS. McNally writes of his inspiration in the introduction to the play,

I think I wanted to write about what it's like to be a gay man at this particular moment in our history. I think I wanted to tell my friends how much they've meant to me. I think I wanted to tell everyone else who we are when they aren't around. I think I wanted to reach out and let more people into those places in my heart where I don't ordinarily welcome strangers. (xii)

McNally successfully shows the world an "insider's view" of gay relationships, by drawing his characters with a variety of experiences and passions. The cast is composed of eight gay men whose relationships vary in degree and intensity: PERRY and ARTHUR have been together for fourteen years; they are "role-models" for gay couples who want to stay together. GREGORY and BOBBY represent a May-September relationship. GREGORY is a professional choreographer in his early forties, and BOBBY is a blind man in his early twenties.

JOHN JECKYLL,⁵ a British man in his late forties, is a spiteful man who dominates RAMON, his early-twenties short-term boyfriend; BUZZ is a mid-thirties musical theater aficionado with AIDS who falls in love with JAMES JECKYLL, JOHN's sweeter-natured twin brother, who also has AIDS.

All of the characters except JAMES come to GREGORY and BOBBY's country home for Memorial Day to rehearse for an AIDS benefit at Carnegie Hall. The men are to put on tutus and dance Swan Lake (McNally, Love 47). PERRY does not want to participate in this campy benefit, because he does not want to dress in drag. BUZZ tells PERRY, "You wouldn't be in drag. I'd have you in tulle, lots and lots of tulle. A vision of hairy legs in a tutu and toe shoes" (48). AIDS benefits were numerous in the nineties, so performing a campy Swan Lake would not be an unusual choice of dance. PERRY tells GREGORY, the choreographer:

PERRY: You've done enough for AIDS. We all have.

GREGORY: Nobody's done enough. Um. For AIDS. . . .

JOHN: People are bloody sick of benefits, Gregory.

PERRY: That's the truth.

BUZZ: Not the people they're being given for.

(48-49)

During the first night, JOHN wanders the house, observing each creak of the bedsprings, each drip of the

toilet; he reads the diary of his host. Besides being a means of exposition, JOHN's reading GREGORY's diary provides the reader/audience a glimpse of JOHN's nasty character. He sneaks into the room where BUZZ sleeps and says, "I see things I shouldn't: Buzz is sleeping in a pool of sweat. They've increased his medication again. And for what? He's dead" (21). JOHN provides for the audience the first clue that BUZZ has AIDS, and he also shows the audience his rancorous temperament by declaring that BUZZ is already dead. BUZZ is the only one of GREGORY and BOBBY's guests with AIDS, though JOHN will bring his twin brother JAMES to join the group at the next gathering, later in the summer.

The second gathering of the friends takes place during the Fourth of July weekend. JOHN has brought his AIDS-stricken brother JAMES, a costume-maker for The National Theatre of London. BUZZ and JAMES quickly develop a friendship because of their mutual interest in theater. JAMES discovers that BUZZ once dated JOHN, JAMES's twin brother, but that BUZZ no longer has a boyfriend, because "When the going gets tough, weak boyfriends get going" (74).

BUZZ is suggesting that the men he is interested in are not interested in him because he has AIDS.

When JAMES comments that he does not mind not having a

boyfriend because "Last acts are depressing and generally one long solo" - an obvious reference to his status as person with AIDS - BUZZ looks at him with affection and replies, "They don't have to be" (74-75). A mutual attraction between BUZZ and JAMES is clear.

BUZZ asks JAMES how sick he is, to which he replies:

JAMES: I think I'm in pretty good nick, but my reports read like something out of Nostradamus.

(He looks at BUZZ.)

I should have died six months ago.

BUZZ: Try eighteen. Do you have any lesions?

JAMES: Only one, and I've had it for nearly a year. . . .

(He pulls up his shirt and lets Buzz see the lesion.)

I have a lesbian friend in London who's the only other person who's ever asked to see it. I was quite astonished when she did. Touched, actually. Mortified, too, of course. But mainly touched. Somebody loves me, even if it's not the someone I've dreamed of. A little love from a woman who works in the box office at the Lyric Hammersmith is better than none. Are you through?

(Buzz kisses the lesion.) (75-76)

BUZZ's kissing what is arguably the most significant physical manifestation of AIDS, a Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion, speaks volumes about unconditional acceptance. BUZZ has no fear of contracting AIDS; he already has it. He understands the necessity of coming to terms with the syndrome and accepting it. JAMES does too. JAMES even comments that he has become "friends" with the lesion, but "not people you like especially, but people you've made your peace with" (76).

The Fourth of July weekend ends as Act Two closes. The friends are gathered around the television, watching with horror the coverage of a gay demonstration in Seattle. A gay man is hit in the head with a nightstick. After moments of appalling violence, they turn the television off. PERRY asks, already knowing the answer: "What is wrong with this country? They hate us. They fucking hate us. They've always hated us. It never ends, the fucking hatred" (107). The scene closes ironically as the group sings "Happy Anniversary" to PERRY and ARTHUR, celebrating their happy union in the wake of watching such violence. The act ends with couples slow dancing together, including BUZZ and JAMES: *(BUZZ and JAMES are dancing closer and closer in a smaller and smaller space. Pretty soon they're just standing, holding on to each other, their arms around each*

other.) (109 *s.d.*). BUZZ and JAMES - two men with AIDS - have fallen in love with each other.

Act Three opens on the first morning of the long Labor Day weekend. Once again the friends have gathered at GREGORY and BOBBY's home. The vile JOHN reads from GREGORY's diary:

"James Jeckyll has decided to stay in this country. Buzz says he will get much better care here. He will also get Buzz. They are in love. I'm glad it happened here. Who could not love James? We have all taken him to our hearts. It will be a sad day when that light goes out." (112-13)

The love that GREGORY's diary so clearly describes is compromised by other feelings that go along with that love. ARTHUR and PERRY are canoeing on the lake, talking,

PERRY: How did we manage [not getting AIDS]?

ARTHUR: Depends on who you slept with.

PERRY: Fourteen years. I haven't been perfect.

Just lucky.

ARTHUR: I've been perfect. . . . Do you ever feel guilty?

PERRY: No, grateful. Why, do you?

ARTHUR: It used to be nearly all the time. No, first I was just scared. Then the guilt. Massive at first. Why not me? That lingers, more than the

fear. . . . Every time I look at Buzz, even when he's driving me crazy, or now James, I have to think, I have to say to myself, "Sooner or later, that man, that human being, is not going to be standing there washing the dishes or tying his shoelace." (120-21)

ARTHUR's comment summarizes what might be called guilt by surviving. It happens when gay men buy into the dominant discourse enough to take the blame for AIDS. They feel guilty when friends die, because they realize that the deceased person took pleasure in the same types of activities the ones who remain uninfected did. Survival guilt is a fairly common emotion across the spectrum of humanity. Survivors of the Holocaust, for example, have long been riddled with feelings of guilt, not only for having survived, but also for having witnessed so many atrocities to their friends and family. Survivors of motor accidents and airplane crashes are frequently known to experience a certain degree of guilt because they lived and others died.

ARTHUR revisits his guilt again after a few moments paddling, when JAMES and BUZZ come into view:

ARTHUR: the fellow next to me with his shoulder to the same wheel isn't so lucky. He gets sick, I don't. Why is that? I think we should both

go together. Is that gay solidarity or a death wish? . . . I will always feel guilty in some private part of me that I don't let anyone see but you, and not even you all of it; I will always feel like a bystander at the genocide of who we are. (122)

ARTHUR, like so many men who have lost friends or lovers to AIDS, feels helpless. He feels guilty for surviving, and he feels guilty for not being able to stop the senseless deaths of his friends. JAMES tells BUZZ he feels guilty, too, but not because of AIDS. Instead, JAMES feels guilty that BUZZ is doing all the paddling (121). This paralleling of lines is deft on McNally's part, because they appear to be in parallel situations on the stage: both couples are in the same water, but they are definitely not in the same boat. The scene ends with PERRY and ARTHUR challenging BUZZ and JAMES to a boat race. This canoe race metaphorically suggests a race for survival. PERRY and ARTHUR paddle away, leaving BUZZ and JAMES behind, with JAMES having soiled himself as a consequence of AIDS (123). McNally insists that the readers/audience see the horrible indignities that AIDS wreaks upon those infected, even in the midst of a rather romantic moment.

BUZZ is not a selfish character. He is PERRY's oldest

and best friend, next to his lover. He is a tender lover for JAMES, and in many ways he is the glue that holds together all of the men's friendships. But BUZZ has AIDS. He tells PERRY that friendship is

BUZZ: . . . not enough sometimes, Perry. You're not sick. You two are going to end up on Golden Pond in matching white wicker rockers. . . . I can't afford to be fair. Fair's a luxury. Fair is for healthy people with healthy lovers in nice apartments with lots of health insurance, which, of course, they don't need, but God forbid someone like me or James should have it. . . . I'm scared I won't be there for James when he needs me and angry he won't be there for me when I need him. . . . I said I wasn't going to do this again. I wasn't going to lose anyone else. I was going to stay healthy, work hard for the clinic, and finish cataloging my original cast albums. . . . And now this. . . . Who's gonna be there for me when it's my turn?

PERRY: We all will. Every one of us.

BUZZ: I wish I could believe that. . . . Can you promise me you'll be holding my hand when I let go? That the last face I see will be yours?

PERRY: Yes.

BUZZ: I believe you. . . . I can't tell you how this matters to me. I'm a very petty person.

PERRY: No, you're not.

BUZZ: I've always had better luck with roommates than lovers.

PERRY: I think this time you got lucky with both.

JAMES (off): Buzz, [the bathtub is] running over.

BUZZ: I adore him. What am I going to do? (131-33)

Love! Valour! Compassion! is the first major play to show two people with AIDS (or seroconcordant) fall in love and actually care for each other. Usually, plays that feature characters with AIDS portray the care-giving partner as AIDS-free. BUZZ tends for JAMES as long as he is able, but their relationship is built on care and love, not on pure passion or antiseptic nursing.

BUZZ's fear of dying alone is reasonable, as well. No person wants to die alone, and BUZZ is no exception. PERRY would likely have succored his friend no matter what the circumstances of BUZZ's illness, but BUZZ has AIDS. PERRY is not nearly as afraid of AIDS as he is a good friend to BUZZ.

In the middle of Act Three, each of the characters breaks the imaginary fourth wall and addresses the audience directly. Each man speaks of his own death. GREGORY will

outlive all of his friends and die alone. PERRY and ARTHUR will die of old age, after having lived happily together for almost forty-four years. RAMON will die in an airplane crash, BOBBY will die with someone named Luke, and JOHN will die alone and bitter.

BUZZ will die much sooner than anyone expects, soon after having met Gwen Verdon at an AIDS benefit. True to his love of campy musical theater, he will have told her that Ethel Merman was a big dyke. JAMES will go back to England and die. He will have taken pills. (137-39).

Most relationships are fragile, regardless of their participants. Tragic events often take their toll on relationships, ruining friendships, dividing families, and destroying intimacy between lovers, but sometimes they are a means of drawing people together to provide support for the afflicted party and succor for that person's friends and family.

Because a person with AIDS must tell his or her friends and family about an affliction that the dominant discourse has so frequently associated with homosexuality - which itself has been traditionally seen as immoral - the revelation is doubly difficult. This may result in the sufferer not revealing anything to family, as Andre chose to do in McNally's "Andre's Mother," or it may cause conscious

or subconscious prejudice as in the same playwright's Lips Together, Teeth Apart.

Rudnick's Jeffrey and McNally's Love! Valour! Compassion! show homosexual characters confronting relationships with gay men who have AIDS. A major difference between these two plays and the others in this chapter is that most of the characters are gay men, so the burden of revealing gender orientation and all that that revelation carries with it is absent. For the most part, the gay characters are much more sympathetic and eager to enter into new friend or love relationships than their heterosexual counterparts in the other plays. The negative image of an AIDS-sufferer as irresponsible homosexual is absent and is replaced by characters who love and are compassionate for humanity.

It is also significant that Jeffrey and Love! Valour! Compassion! feature relationships with people living with AIDS, whereas the other plays are about mostly heterosexual people who discuss and grieve for their sons and brothers who are already dead from AIDS. If these plays as a group teach anything, they teach that communication leads to understanding. Andre's mother did not know her son had AIDS. Had she and Andre been willing to talk about Andre's life, they may not have been able to prevent his contracting the

ailment, but they would have at least been able to love and support one another.

NOTES

¹ Camp is rather difficult to define, but it always has three Rabelaisian characteristics: incongruity (a man dressing in woman's clothing, for example), theatricality or self-conscious artificiality, and humor. A Las Vegas-style female impersonator would not be considered campy, because she is seriously impersonating a woman. Drag queens, on the other hand, are usually campy, because often they exaggerate feminine movements and female characteristics (Bergman, "Camp" 130-35). Some critics argue that camp is a strategy that gay men and lesbians use to make themselves disempowered to a heterosexual audience; therefore, they are less "threatening" (Bergman 119). Several studies of camp are available, including Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp,'" David Bergman's Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality, Philip Core's Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth, and Mark Booth's Camp.

² Lip-synching, or mouthing the words to songs while the lyrics play in the background, is the primary means of performance for drag queens. I Could Go On Lip-Synching features an elaborate soundtrack of songs and dialogue, all lip-synched by Lypsinka (Roman 95).

³ AIDS rarely affects women who have sex with women, or

lesbians, according to the Centers for Disease Control ("HIV/AIDS and Women"). As of December 1996, 85,500 American women were reported to have AIDS, but only 333 cases were reported by women who had sex only with other women. Of these, all but three percent had another risk factor, mostly IV drug use. As of December 1996, no confirmed AIDS cases of female-to-female transmission had been reported, either because other risk factors were involved or because a few women refused to be interviewed.

⁴ There are many theories about why gay men are so attracted to musical theater. One likely reason is that gay men historically could participate in the culturally suspect activities of singing and dancing - both traditionally high-brow, effeminate activities - without betraying their sexuality. Like other minorities, gay men tend to gather where they feel safest, and the theater has long provided an established safe haven (Dukes 497). Gay fans of musical theater may recite lines, imitate gestures, or sing songs in a campy way to alleviate tension in a stressful situation or to provide the fan a snappy comeback or wilting put-down. Because so many gay men are attracted to musical theater, either as performers or fans, gay men have been stereotyped as musical theater mavens.

⁵ McNally alludes to Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. JOHN JECKYLL is mean-spirited and nasty, but his identical twin brother JAMES is sweet-tempered and lovable. In both the play and film versions, JOHN and JAMES JECKYLL are played by the same actor.

CHAPTER 4

AIDS AND ANGELS IN AMERICA

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

- Genesis 32:24-28

Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches (1993), joined with the second half of the Brechtian epic,¹ Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika (1996) (hereafter individually referred to as Millennium and Perestroika, respectively, or as Angels collectively), represent a change in the way American dramatists write about homosexuality and how they present characters with AIDS in particular. Most early AIDS dramas, including especially Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, had as their thematic *raison d'être* educating the audience members about AIDS and encouraging them to take strong political and social stances that rejected the dominant discourse propagated by the media, the government,

and the medical establishment. Many of the earliest plays or performance art pieces about AIDS were performed in gay bars or predominantly gay theaters in New York and other metropolitan areas. The audiences were often mostly homosexuals or heterosexuals in sympathy with the plight of their gay brothers. However, the end of the homophobic Reagan/Bush era in the early nineties and a general shift from mere tolerance closer to acceptance of homosexuality by the public at large² set the stage for a new AIDS drama that would appeal to more people. Michael Cadden writes:

If Kramer's play [The Normal Heart] is about how the health problems of a relatively homogeneous minority have been ignored or dismissed by American majoritarian culture, Kushner's play reflects a new gay self-recognition about the ways which the oppression of gay men and lesbians, like the oppression of other minority groups, has been integral to majoritarian self-recognition, especially during the Reaganite 1980s, when antihomosexuality served many of the same purposes that anticommunism did in the 1950s. . . . For Kramer AIDS is about the fate of the gay community; for Kushner AIDS . . . is about the

fate of the country. (83-84)

Angels is situated in the broad context of American literary, political, and social history. Kushner stands on the shoulders of other American dramatists like Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, who brought to the American stage controversial subjects, social commentary, and political opinion. Angels also stands at the epicenter of identity politics, in an age in which virtually any television newscast features a story about race or gender relations. McCarthyism, religion, immigration, and America as "the great melting pot" are all part of Angels; all Americans have a stake in what is discussed in Angels. After all, the subtitle of Angels in America is "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes." John Clum calls Kushner's epic work "a turning point in the history of gay drama, the history of American drama, and of American literary culture" (Introduction 1), and Harold Bloom lists it in The Western Canon.

Two plots dominate Angels in America. PRIOR WALTER is a designer and caterer with AIDS. His lover, LOUIS IRONSON, leaves him shortly after he sees a Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion on PRIOR's shoulder. LOUIS meets JOE, infamous attorney ROY COHN's protege, and they start sleeping together after JOE leaves his wife HARPER. PRIOR's health deteriorates, so he

is taken care of by BELIZE, a nurse at Bethesda Memorial Hospital, who is a former drag queen.

The second plot shows BELIZE also taking care of ROY COHN, the notorious attorney who helped prosecute Julius and ETHEL ROSENBERG for treason. COHN is also infected with AIDS, but he refuses to acknowledge his own homosexuality, because "Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout" (Millennium 45). COHN uses his clout to acquire the then-experimental drug AZT in hopes of alleviating the symptoms of AIDS. When COHN dies, BELIZE takes several bottles of AZT and gives them to PRIOR, in hopes of extending his life.

The play is riddled with subplots and ironies. JOE, the man LOUIS encounters, is a Mormon whose religion excoriates homosexuality; HARPER, JOE's wife, is drug-addicted. She moves in and out of reality, sometimes talking to an imaginary travel agent appropriately named MR. LIES, who takes her on drug-induced "vacations." LOUIS's grandmother, the RABBI who buries her in the opening scene of the play, and ETHEL ROSENBERG appear at various times throughout the play, mostly to remind the audience and the characters of their common political and social past.

The PRIOR WALTER plot and the ROY COHN plot are roughly

parallel in structure. At the beginning of Millennium, both are represented as being in the early stages of full-blown AIDS. PRIOR reveals his serostatus by removing his jacket and showing LOUIS a Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion under his arm - "PRIOR: K.S., baby. Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death" (Millennium 21) - while ROY COHN is told of his serostatus by his doctor. Both men get progressively more frail, and both are hospitalized at approximately the same time. Kushner parallels the physical deterioration of the two men to show the ravages of the syndrome on otherwise healthy men. Of course AIDS manifests itself differently in different people, but its ultimate physical decimation is universal. However, Kushner distinguishes the emotional and spiritual effects AIDS has on ROY and PRIOR.

ROY COHN "is a pernicious closet case whose self-loathing has fueled a lifetime of political aggression against homosexuals, whom he defines with brutal bravado as men who 'have zero clout'" (Miller 65). His character, which Kushner cautiously identifies as a work of dramatic fiction in the play's disclaimer, denies his homosexuality because his is a world of power politics, and he is defined by his power. ROY says to his doctor,

ROY: AIDS. Your problem, Henry, is that you are

hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that. . . . No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. Now to someone who does not understand this, homosexual is what I am because I have sex with men. But really this is wrong. . . . I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because *what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys. (Millennium 45-46)

ROY is obsessed with power, and he sees sex as *power*, not as an expression of love. He equates homosexuality with

political death or the death of power. He rejects the label of "homosexual" because homosexuals have no dominance in the Reagan power structure; instead of being labeled as a member of a disempowered group, he lies to himself to convince himself and all around him that he not only has power, but he is in control. He manipulates his sexual partners into being pawns of his power. AIDS is, in his mind, an emblem of homosexuality at its least powerful, so he rejects his doctor's diagnosis. He tells his doctor, "AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer" (Millennium 46).

ROY is hospitalized all throughout Perestroika, and because of the pain-killing morphine, he hallucinates that he sees ETHEL ROSENBERG. She appears alone, without her equally infamous husband, Julius, perhaps because in some ways she is symbolic of ROY's mother, Dora. Cohn biographer Nicholas von Hoffman suggests that Cohn's parents' marriage was arranged and loveless, and that Dora insisted upon raising her son in her own fashion. For example, when Roy Cohn was born, he had a small bone spur on his nose. Dora's single-mindedness drove her to have her son's nose operated on several times, leaving a disfiguring scar on Cohn's nose for the rest of his life (52). Cohn may have transferred his ill-will about his upbringing to Ethel Rosenberg, another powerful woman. He referred to her as a "den mother," who

supervised her family's part in the Communist movement, and he thought she was the person who initially involved her family in espionage, despite the evidence to the contrary (von Hoffman 102-03). Cohn savagely prosecuted Ethel Rosenberg, although the preponderance of thought now is that she would not have been prosecuted at all had the atmosphere around the whole case not been charged with fear and anger (von Hoffman 95).

Though COHN never admits it, ETHEL ROSENBERG clearly represents his guilty conscience, initially as a result of how savagely the real Roy Cohn prosecuted the Rosenbergs and ultimately compounded by his homosexuality and his perception that his body has betrayed him by contracting AIDS.

During one of his hallucinations, ROY sees ROSENBERG and reiterates his fear of disempowerment because of his serostatus:

The worst thing about being sick in America,
Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade.
Americans have no use for sick. Look at Reagan:
He's so healthy he's hardly human, he's a hundred
if he's a day, he takes a slug in his chest and
two days later he's out west riding ponies in his
PJ's. I mean who does that? That's America. It's

just no country for the infirm. (Perestroika 58)

During his last days, the historical Roy Cohn was disbarred for unethically "borrowing" money from a client and subsequently lying about it (von Hoffman 456). Kushner's ROY COHN's last and only wish before dying is to die while retaining some modicum of power, but he is denied that wish:

ROY: I'm going, Ethel. Finally, finally done with this world, at long long last. All mine enemies will be standing on the other shore, mouths gaping open like stupid fish, while the Almighty parts the Sea of Death and lets his Royboy cross over to Jordan. On dry land and still a lawyer.

ETHEL: Don't count your chickens, Roy. It's over.

ROY: Over?

ETHEL: I wanted the news should come from me. The panel ruled against you Roy.

ROY: No, no, they only started meeting two days ago.

ETHEL: They recommended disbarment.

ROY: The Executive still has to rule . . . on the recommendation, it'll take another week to sort it out and before then . . .

ETHEL: The Executive was waiting, and they ruled, one two three. They accepted the panel's

recommendation. . . . One of the main guys on the Executive leaned over to his friend and said, "Finally. I've hated that little faggot for thirty-six years." . . . They won, Roy. You're not a lawyer anymore. (Perestroika 112)

ROY's use of biblical-sounding language is reminiscent of a dying Moses whose final desire is to see the Promised Land, but ROY is no Moses. Once again his power-lust overwhelms even a potentially poignant moment before his death, when he declares that the Almighty favors him, calling himself the Almighty's "Royboy." Somehow, ROY reasons, God will punish his enemies - everyone that ever opposed him legally, ethically, medically, or sexually - and allow him to cross over to Jordan as a lawyer, his primary means of maintaining power.

The character based on Ethel Rosenberg tells ROY, the character based on the attorney who prosecuted Rosenberg and her husband for treason, that he has been disbarred; by doing so she disempowers him, but she compounds ROY's humiliation by repeating the comment that one of the men on the Executive review panel said. ROY learns that he is disbarred, and he discovers that the secret homosexual life that he found so distasteful was not a secret after all. Even the illusion of power that he creates by denying his

homosexuality is destroyed.

ROY remains in contradiction with himself, even to the end of his own life (the historical Cohn was rumored to be homosexual for many years before his death, but he denied the rumors vehemently), and his "sophistry embodies the intellectual, moral, and spiritual stagnation from which most of Kushner's characters and the nation itself are seen to suffer in Angels in America" (Cadden 85).

In a 1993 interview, Tony Kushner told Patrick Pacheco, "The play was designed to culminate in a certain way with Roy's death, but the main person with AIDS was Prior" (55). PRIOR is apparently aware of his serostatus early in Millennium, when he tells his lover LOUIS why he did not tell him about a Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion earlier than he did:

LOUIS: When did you find this?

PRIOR: I couldn't tell you.

LOUIS: Why?

PRIOR: I was scared, Lou.

LOUIS: Of what?

PRIOR: That you'll leave me. (22)

PRIOR's fears are justified, because LOUIS leaves him shortly thereafter, for JOE, a closeted gay Republican

Mormon who is ROY COHN's protege.

Much of what is interesting about PRIOR's character - in fact, almost all of the critical events involving this character - occurs either during dreams or hallucinations. Kushner does this to annihilate the boundaries between reality and illusion, a kind of cross between the poetic realism of O'Neill and Williams and the metadramatic, political theater of Brecht that Kushner calls the "Theater of the Fabulous" (Clum, Introduction 2-3).

Early in Millennium, PRIOR dreams he is sitting in front of a make-up table, putting on his drag face. He speaks,

PRIOR: One wants to move through life with elegance and grace, blossoming infrequently but with exquisite taste, and perfect timing, like a rare bloom, a zebra orchid. . . . One wants. . . . But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One . . . dies at thirty, robbed of . . . decades of majesty. Fuck this shit. Fuck this shit. (30-31)

PRIOR seems to be prepared to surrender his fight against AIDS, justifiably feeling as if his life has been cut short, much like an exotic flower is cut at the height of its

beauty. Into this dream comes HARPER, JOE's wife, who tells PRIOR, "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease," and then disappears (Millennium 34). HARPER has identified hope, the hope that ROY COHN cannot have because he rejects who he is. Inside PRIOR is heart, courage, and faith, but even PRIOR does not understand the revelation HARPER has made. He says, "I don't think there's any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty" (Millennium 35).

As PRIOR, in the dream, begins wiping away his drag make-up, a single gray feather falls from above, and "an *incredibly beautiful voice*" (Millennium 34 *s.d.*) commands him to

A VOICE: Look up, look up,
 prepare the way
 the infinite descent
 A breath in air
 floating down
 Glory to . . . (Millennium 35)

and the voice goes silent. PRIOR has just had his first angelic visitation.

LOUIS leaves PRIOR after PRIOR is hospitalized because of complications from AIDS. PRIOR tells BELIZE, his nurse

and friend, that the drug he is taking is very strange, that it causes him to hear voices. BELIZE is concerned, but PRIOR tells him, "I want the voice; it's wonderful. It's all that's keeping me alive" (Millennium 60).

BELIZE leaves the room, and the Angelic voice returns, saying,

VOICE: Soon I will return, I will reveal myself to you; I am glorious, glorious; my heart, my countenance and my message. You must prepare.

PRIOR: For what? I don't want to . . .

VOICE: No death, no: A marvelous work and a wonder we undertake, an edifice awry we sink plumb and straighten, a great Lie we abolish, a great error correct, with the rule, sword and broom of Truth!

. . . I am on my way; when I am manifest, our Work begins: Prepare for the parting of the air, The breath, the ascent, Glory to (Millennium 62)

It is only in dreams or in a semi-conscious state that PRIOR sees the ANGEL. Rob Baker points out that "[T]he audience is never really expected to believe that the Angel is real, but at the same time she's never quite merely the product of Prior's imagination" (220).

Act Three of Millennium opens with PRIOR waking from a

violent nightmare. When he awakens (though one must question his lucidity), he sees a man dressed in the attire of a thirteenth-century British squire. PRIOR questions him and learns that he is also named Prior Walter, and that he is an ancestor. This thirteenth-century Prior Walter tells the twentieth-century PRIOR WALTER the cause of his own death: the plague. Another Prior Walter appears, this one from the seventeenth century. He died of the Black Plague (85-87). Kushner uses these prior Priors to represent history, and the parallels among the three plagues in the different time periods suggest perpetuity: there will always be something to threaten public health; there have been plagues before and there will be plagues again. Kushner uses these three Prior Walters to suggest that it matters less whether or when we defeat this particular plague than it does how we deal with the plague at hand.

Even though these distinct generations of Prior Walters identify historically untimely deaths as a result of various types of plagues (Although AIDS is not technically a plague, it is frequently referred to as a plague.), they also represent a long, long line of survival. There have been Prior Walters since the thirteenth century, and these ancestors appear to the twentieth-century PRIOR, questioning why there is not yet another generation of Prior Walters.

The ancestors disappear when they discover that PRIOR is a homosexual; however, their disappearance does not necessarily bespeak disapproval. Rather, it suggests that they simply may not have the sensibilities of late twentieth-century Americans who are relatively tolerant of homosexuality (114).

The final scene of Millennium finds PRIOR in his apartment, alone and comparing himself to Ophelia in her mad scene (115). He hears the sound of beating wings, and as the sound intensifies, "*[Prior] is washed over by an intense sexual feeling*" (117 *s.d.*). The ceiling groans and creaks, and plaster falls from above, when triumphal music blazes and the lights shift through the prism. PRIOR, awestruck, whispers, "God almighty . . . Very Steven Spielberg," as the ANGEL crashes through the ceiling, announcing, "Greetings, Prophet; The Great Work begins: The Messenger has arrived" (118-19).

Millennium ends with the ANGEL's enigmatic announcement. Neither the audience nor PRIOR knows what the ANGEL has come promising or who the ANGEL is. Kushner here plays with the audience/readers' expectations of the coming millennium. For some millennialists, the coming millennium represents an end to life as it is known, to be replaced either by some God-directed paradise in which Christ rules

supreme, or by one thousand years of hellish tyranny by Satan and his dominions. Other groups count on the millennium to bring new and encouraging visions of the future. Kushner cleverly closes the first play of the epic precisely in the middle of this dichotomy. The only specific name or identification of any angel in the work up to this point is PRIOR's claim that the angel of death kissed him in the place where the KS lesion he showed LOUIS earlier appeared (Millennium 21), thereby implying an end of life. On the other hand, the ANGEL has promised a "Great Work," implying something positive. Kushner tells Patrick Pacheco in an interview, "Millennium ends with wild fantasy. You don't know if that's the angel of death or the angel of deliverance, but it's gorgeous and it's fun" (58).

The second half of Kushner's epic, Perestroika, opens with ALEKSII ANTEDILLUVIANOVICH PRELAPSARIANOV, the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik, giving a speech in the Hall of Deputies in The Kremlin, January 1986. The Russification of the words "antediluvian" (before the flood) and "prelapsarian" (before the fall) suggest that PRELAPSARIANOV clings to an out-dated hope of the glorious past. The second half of Kushner's epic is called Perestroika, alluding to the fall and ultimate re-creation of Russia, unfortunately with a similarly totalitarian government. PRELAPSARIANOV

asks the Soviet reformers a series of questions about the future:

Are we doomed? . . . Will the past release us?
 . . . Can we Change? . . . What System of Thought
 have these Reformers to present to this mad
 swirling planetary disorganization . . . ? Do they
 have, as we did, a beautiful Theory, as bold, as
 Grand, as comprehensive a construct . . . ?
 Change? Yes, we must must change, only show me the
 Theory, and I will be at the barricades, show me
 the book of the next Beautiful Theory, and I
 promise you these blind eyes will see again, just
 to read it, to devour that text. Show me the words
 that will reorder the world, or else keep silent
 Then we dare not, we *cannot*, we MUST NOT
 move ahead! (13-15)

PRELAPSARIANOV is speaking of the end of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. For much of the last half of the twentieth century, the rules of international diplomacy were fairly clear but rather touchy; the United States and the Soviet Union stood toe-to-toe, each ready to overturn the other.

Metaphorically, PRELAPSARIANOV's words represent the Zeitgeist of the era. Eschatological questions were abundant

in the late twentieth century: millennialists predicted the end of the world or the coming (or second coming) of the Christ. Homosexuality has frequently been associated with the end of times in apocalyptic writings, and AIDS is often figured as a means by which God (or the capitalists, for the Soviets) brings forth the end. Old rules no longer applied; there will be a new world order (Garner 173).

PRELAPSARIANOV's speech is punctuated by the ANGEL's descent, repeated exactly as it concluded the end of Millennium. Later that same night, PRIOR again wakes up from a nightmare. The stage directions indicate that *"He looks under the covers. He discovers that the lap of his pajamas is soaked in cum"* (Perestroika 19 s.d.). He immediately calls BELIZE, his friend and nurse, and tells him he feels "[L]ascivious sad. Wonderful and horrible all at once, like . . . like there's a war inside. My eyes are funny, I . . . I'm crying. . . .I'm scared. And also full of, I don't know, Joy or something. Hope" (Perestroika 20).

Three weeks later, PRIOR tells BELIZE that the ANGEL gave him a sort of book of prophecy; then in a flashback, the scene is re-enacted, with BELIZE watching and interjecting commentary. In the flashback, PRIOR recounts the ANGEL's visitation in great detail, explaining her

often-confusing pronouncements. The ANGEL announces:

ANGEL: I I I I / Am the Bird of America, the Bald
Eagle,/ Continental Principality, / LUMEN PHOSPHOR
FLUOR CANDLE!/ I unfold my leaves, Bright steel,/

In salutation open sharp before you: PRIOR WALTER/
Long-descended, well-prepared. . . . / American
Prophet tonight you become,/ American Eye that
pierceth Dark,/ American Heart all Hot for Truth,/

The True Great Vocalist, the Knowing Mind,/

Tongue-of-the-Land, Seer-Head! . . . Remove from
their hiding place the Sacred Prophetic
Implements. (Perestroika 36-37)

The ANGEL is four Principalities in one, hence the repetition of "I" in the first line. Each "I" represents one of four characteristics - Lumen, Phosphor, Fluor, and Candle - each of which are a type of illumination. This metaphor is carried through the next line, when the ANGEL opens a book, therefore "illuminating" PRIOR both by new knowledge and by declaring him a Whitmanesque "American Prophet" whose new vision "pierceth Dark." However, PRIOR has no idea of what he is supposed to be a prophet. He takes one of the Sacred Prophetic Implements, a pair of bronze spectacles that have rocks instead of lenses. PRIOR sees something awful in the rock lenses, but it is never made

explicitly clear what he sees. The ANGEL then opens a large book with bright steel pages, and she tells PRIOR to read.

PRIOR interrupts the ANGEL, asking, "How come. . . . How come I have this . . . um, erection? It's very hard to concentrate" (Perestroika 39). The ANGEL insists that he read, and she reads aloud:

ANGEL: You are Mere Flesh. I I I I am Utter
Flesh,/ Density of Desire, the Gravity of Skin:
What makes the Engine of Creation Run?/ Not
Physics But Ecstatics Makes the Engine Run.
(Perestroika 39)

PRIOR and the ANGEL "*both get very turned-on*" and PRIOR is "*[H]it by a wave of intense sexual feeling*" (40 s.d.). The ANGEL continues:

ANGEL: The Pulse, the Pull, the Throb, the Ooze .
. . . Priapsis, Dilation, Engorgement, Flow:/ The
Universe Aflame with Angelic Ejaculate. . . . The
Heavens A-thrum to the Seraphic Rut,/ The Fiery
Grapplings. . . . The Feathery Joinings of the
Higher Orders,/ Infinite, Unceasing, the Blood-
Pump of Creation! . . . / HOLY Estrus! HOLY
Orifice! Ecstasis in Excelsus! AMEN! (Perestroika
40)

The ANGEL is essentially raping PRIOR, as he gets more and

more turned on by her sexually-charged reading. The ANGEL tells PRIOR that their encounter culminated in "Plasma Orgasmata," the Angelic equivalent of ejaculate. PRIOR explains to BELIZE, who is watching this flashback, that "Angelic orgasm makes protomatter, which fuels the Engine of Creation. They used to copulate *ceaselessly* before" but he breaks his sentence before he can identify what "before" indicates (Perestroika 41). However, PRIOR explains, because angels have no imagination and cannot invent or create anything, "they're sort of fabulous and dull all at once" (41). Therefore, "God split the World in Two," PRIOR explains, making "Human Beings: Uni-Genitaled: Female. Male" (Perestroika 41).

The ANGEL continues in her Biblical tones, and PRIOR interprets her words for BELIZE. The ANGEL says that in creating humans, God set in motion the potential for change and growth. As humans progressed, the plan of Heaven began to unravel because humans began to think of God and the Angels as only dreams. God, bored with the Angels and mortified by humans, abandoned the Angels on April 18, 1906, the day of the great San Francisco earthquake. The Angels think that humans should stop changing, stop growing in hopes of causing God to return to them (Perestroika 43-44).

The ANGEL speaks softly to the terrified PRIOR:

ANGEL (*Softly*): Forsake the Open Road:/ Neither
 Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow:/ If you
 do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress: Seek Not
 to Fathom the World and its Delicate Particle
 Logic:/ You cannot Understand, You can only
 Destroy,/ You do not Advance, You only Trample./
 Poor blind Children, abandoned on the Earth,/
 Groping terrified, misguided, over/ Fields of
 Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain:/ HOBBLE
 YOURSELVES!/ There is No Zion Save Where You Are!
 (Perestroika 45)

The ANGEL's promise in Millennium to undertake "a marvelous work and a wonder," to abolish "a great Lie," and to correct "a great error" (62) is not a call for change; instead, she plans to secure the existing identity categories and seats of power into immobility, planted with "Deep Roots." Understanding the purpose of the ANGEL's visit is key to understanding the Angels epic. The ANGEL in Angels in America does not bring hope, as the American *fin de siècle* fascination with angels in any manifestation expects.

The ANGEL speaks again to PRIOR:

ANGEL'S VOICE: Whisper into the ear of the World,
 Prophet,/ Wash up red in the tide of its dreams,/
 And billow bloody words into the sky of

sleep /FOR THIS AGE OF ANOMIE: A NEW LAW!/
 Delivered this night, this silent night, from
 Heaven,/ Oh Prophet, to You. (Perestroika 48).

The ANGEL's instructions sound apocalyptic, which is appropriate because this ANGEL is the ANGEL of the millennium. Reminiscent of the Book of Revelation in its imagery, the ANGEL prepares PRIOR to declare a new age, an age of lacking. She brings PRIOR the message on a "silent night," certainly alluding to the Christmas carol which proclaims the birth of Jesus Christ, a new Prophet or Messiah who will bring hope to the world. "Anomie" suggests a lack of hope, purpose, identity, or ethical values in a society. PRIOR is therefore the unwilling Prophet of no hope.

PRIOR and HANNAH, JOE's mother, are at the Mormon Visitors Center when PRIOR has an attack of pneumonia. She takes him to the hospital to assuage his unsettled mind, where she tells him about the vision of Joseph Smith while the doctor performs her medical examination. PRIOR takes interest and asks her if the Biblical prophets ever rejected their visions. She claims that there is scriptural precedent, and then explains

HANNAH: An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid

of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new (Perestroika 103).

HANNAH, the Mormon woman, believes that angels exist, and that they have physical characteristics, just as the Bible suggests. However, she understands angels to be fallible creatures who are able to "let [someone] down." Although it is unclear which she means, HANNAH implies that angels are capable of inadvertently disappointing humans or perhaps intentionally misleading them. In either case, the human with free will can reject the angel's incapable help or intentional misdirection.

Later that night, the ANGEL makes another visitation:

ANGEL: I I I I Have Returned, Prophet,/ And not according to Plan.

PRIOR: Take it back. (Big thunderclap) The Book, whatever you left in me, I won't be its repository, I reject it. (*Thunder. To Hannah:*) Help me out here. HELP ME! . . . WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO . . .

HANNAH (*Overlap*): You . . . you . . . wrestle her. . . . It's an angel, you . . . just . . . grab hold and say "I will not let thee go except thou bless me!" (Perestroika 116)

PRIOR takes HANNAH's advice to reject the teaching the ANGEL

has given him. Of course, HANNAH remembers Jacob's wrestling with the angel in Genesis, and she instructs PRIOR to demand a blessing from the ANGEL. PRIOR feebly grabs the ANGEL and says,

PRIOR: I . . . will not let thee go except thou bless me. Take back your Book. Anti-Migration, that's so feeble, I can't believe you couldn't do better than that, free me, unfetter me, bless me or whatever but I will be let go. (Perestroika 117)

The ANGEL tells PRIOR that he may return the Text to Heaven, and the room goes dark. The ANGEL kisses HANNAH on the forehead, and she has "*an enormous orgasm*" (118 *s.d.*)

In heaven, PRIOR discovers that there are "Seven Myriad Infinite Aggregate Angelic Entities" in the "Hall of the Continental Principalities," each named for one of the seven continents (Perestroika 126). PRIOR approaches the Principalities and says, "I. . . . I want to return this," referring to the Text, and then,

PRIOR: It just. . . . It just. . . . We can't just stop. We're not rocks - progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for*. Even if we go

faster than we should. We can't wait. . . . So
 thank you . . . for sharing this with me, but I
 don't want to keep it. (Perestroika 130)

PRIOR rejects the ANGEL's book and its philosophy of stasis in favor of the ability to progress, because without progress, humans die. He explains that humanity is animated by the ability to desire, even when the desire is to do nothing or to progress too fast.

The ANGEL OCEANA says to the ANGEL OF AMERICA, "He wants to live" (Perestroika 131). PRIOR wants to live, to be healthy again, but the Angels do not know how to make the plague of AIDS go away. They do offer an end to suffering, an end to the unknowable in stasis. PRIOR replies,

PRIOR: But still. Still. Bless me anyway. I want more life. I can't help myself. I do. I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much much worse, but. . . . You see them living anyway. . . . Death usually has to take life away. I don't know if that's just the animal. I don't know if it's not braver to die. But I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough, so inadequate but. . . .

Bless me anyway. I want more life. (133)

PRIOR insists that the ANGELS bless him, much as Jacob demands a blessing from the angel in Genesis. Like most people, PRIOR wants to live for any amount of time longer. The ANGELS have offered PRIOR a new life of stasis, but PRIOR refuses, because he believes that a life without change, without progress is nothing more than living death. He stands firm, insisting that only death will stop the progress of life. When he tells the ANGELS, "We live past hope," PRIOR means humans desire life so much they want to continue living even when there is no chance of recovery or cure. This is particularly poignant coming from PRIOR, a man with AIDS, because the syndrome has brought him close to death and in the future will bring him closer still.

PRIOR asks the ANGELS to "Bless [him] anyway," in spite of his serostatus. This blessing is more than just a gift of more life, though. Genesis says that Jacob received his blessing because he struggled with God and men, and he overcame them (32.28). PRIOR's blessing is no less deserved, because he wrestles figuratively with the ANGELS; also, PRIOR, as the representative for both gay men and persons with AIDS, has wrestled with the American public as well, fighting for recognition, honor, and dignity.

Kushner explains his vision for PRIOR's refusal of the

prophecy,

What Prior is refusing is a very specific message and a very specific part of himself that he needs to refuse in order to make his decision: not just *to survive* but that *he wants* to survive. I think these are very different things. I think that if it was anybody's decision to live, most people would decide that they would want to. But when you don't have the choice, then to make the decision that you *would like* to live is sometimes very difficult. Because sometimes death . . . has become an attractive option. . . . Even when there is clearly no joy left in life, why is it that we won't surrender? . . . [T]hat's what Perestroika is all about, what Prior's struggle with the angels is all about. (Pacheco 56).

Perestroika ends four years later, with PRIOR, HANNAH, LOUIS, and BELIZE in Central Park, sitting on the rim of the Bethesda Fountain, beneath the statue of the Bethesda angel. They speak of Perestroika, the thaw of the Cold War and the dissolution of the old Soviet ideals in favor of change. PRIOR addresses the audience, explaining that the Bethesda angel is his favorite angel of all, because she is an angel of healing. The waters are not flowing during his address,

because it is the middle of winter; however, the summer brings its own kind of thaw, its own "perestroika" when the frozen stillness gives way to life. The play ends with PRIOR's final hope for the audience:

PRIOR: Bye now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins. (Perestroika 146)

Unlike most AIDS plays, Angels ends with the main AIDS-infected character living and hopeful. Kushner explains,

It was important to me to create a character with AIDS who was not passive, who did not die at the end, but whose illness was treated realistically. So it wasn't just one lesion on the shoulder and then a little coughing fit and then he dies in time for the surviving lover to make a moving little speech that gets everybody in the theater to cry and then leave feeling uplifted. . . .

[T]he point is that people *do* survive. (emphasis in original) (Pacheco 51, 55)

The primary audience of AIDS plays shifted dramatically from homosexuals and their straight supporters to the public at large with Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning Angels in America epic. In this two-part play, living beyond AIDS

is represented as a powerful force. Without change, without progress, Angels warns, life stagnates. Angels also introduces the theater-going public to powerful drugs that are designed to alleviate the symptoms of AIDS. AIDS is still the centerpiece of the epic, and AIDS and homosexuality are inextricably blended in the play.

NOTES

¹ Kushner's Angels plays follow the tradition of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. Their loosely connected scenes and disruption of illusion by allowing the audience to see all actors on stage at all times, along with other alienation devices and political and social messages throughout the plays, place Kushner in this Brechtian tradition.

² The Clinton administration in the 1990's brought the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding homosexuals to the United States military, which allows homosexuals to serve as long as they do not reveal their gender orientation. Although the policy ultimately leaves gays in the military in the closet, it has at least lifted an otherwise sexist ban against homosexuals altogether. Corporate America is also gradually moving to a more accepting position on homosexuality. In the 1990's, Disney instituted a policy that awards benefits to same-sex partners of employees. In 2000, three major automobile manufacturers - GM, Ford, and Daimler-Chrysler - joined companies including Apple, Boeing, AT&T, and Texas Instruments in extending benefits to same-sex partners of employees.

CHAPTER 5

RENT: AIDS AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

And then came now. Different times. Now we enjoy politics and argue sex. Now they know who we are. We're counted in their surveys. We're numbered in their watchfulness. We're powered in their press. We're courted, polled, placated. . . . The myths slowly peel away and the mysteries fade. Now they know that we're teachers and doctors and lawyers and priests and mothers and babies. . . . Now when they tell lies about us we answer back. We've found our voices. We know who we are. They know who we are. And they know that we care what they think. Harvey Fierstein - Safer Sex

Jonathan Larson's 1996 smash Broadway musical hit Rent in a very real way represents the apex of contemporary thought in AIDS drama. Although the characters with AIDS in Kushner's Angels in America were homosexual, the pair of plays moved AIDS beyond being a "homosexual disease" and presented it instead as a national issue, with interpersonal, physical, professional, and spiritual implications previously unexplored in the earlier, more didactic representations of the syndrome of Larry Kramer and William Hoffman.

Rent is considerably different than the other plays discussed in this study. It is a musical rather than a play; AIDS! The Musical!, mentioned earlier, is more informally

produced than Rent, and it is composed of several thematically related sketches rather than a composite plot.¹ Furthermore, Rent is a contemporary update of Puccini's 1896 opera La Boheme; all other plays in this study are original creations. Rent has been seen by far more people than any of the other plays discussed in this study, and it has made well over a billion dollars in performance, music sales, and related merchandising (Schulman 2).

Possibly the most important difference between Rent and the plays previously discussed is the fact that its author, Jonathan Larson, was heterosexual. Without diminishing his compassion and real heartache about his friends who lived with and died from AIDS, Larson, like many of his homosexual counterparts, was able to purge his writing of the sometimes shrill didacticism present in the early AIDS plays of Larry Kramer and to some extent William Hoffman, and he breaks the unseen boundaries of prejudice that limit compassionate renderings of AIDS sufferers to homosexuals in other dramatizations.

Like Kushner, Larson uses the new millennium thematically, playing on the late twentieth-century audience's initial expectations that the millennium portends ominous change; however, unlike Kushner, whose ANGEL announces a change of attitude to parallel the new

millennium, Larson deconstructs the hopes and fears traditionally ascribed to millennialists by making the upcoming millennium just another new year. Similarly, AIDS in Rent could almost as easily have been cancer or hepatitis or any other fatal malady. Larson does not overtly focus his attention on the syndrome itself; instead, his characters meet, fall in love, and fight for their survival at the end of the calendar year, which also happens to be the brink of the new millennium, in spite of their difficulties. Of the forty-two songs in the show (the show has virtually no spoken dialogue -- at best, dialogue is present as recitative only), only about one-quarter mention AIDS, and then most refer to the syndrome only in passing.

Rent author Jonathan Larson died of an aortic aneurism at the age of 35, the night before his *tour de force* opened at the New York Theatre Workshop ("The History of Rent"). Larson's death attracted a great deal of attention, given that he died only one day before his musical opened, and also because Rent, an updated version of La Boheme, was scheduled to premiere on the one hundredth anniversary of the original La Boheme ("The History of Rent"). The focus on Larson instead of AIDS prompted POZ, a periodical that reports on the issues of people who are HIV-positive, to claim, "in the resulting media frenzy over the death of

Larson and the rebirth of [La Boheme], AIDS has been overlooked" (qtd. in Roman 272).

Rent intersperses the La Boheme plot with a similar plot involving gay characters. ROGER DAVIS is a heterosexual man who falls in love with MIMI MARQUEZ, a Puerto Rican stripper. Both have AIDS, but neither has disclosed this fact to the other. The second plot centers on ROGER's former roommate TOM COLLINS, a black college philosophy professor, who falls in love with ANGEL DUMOTT SCHUNARD, a Puerto Rican cross-dresser. Both have AIDS. MARK COHEN, ROGER's heterosexual roommate - and the only AIDS-free major male character - is a documentary maker whose girlfriend, JOANNE JEFFERSON, has left him for a woman, MAUREEN JOHNSON. Neither JOANNE nor MAUREEN have AIDS.

Another former roommate, BENJAMIN COFFIN III, calls on ROGER and MARK, asking them to pay the past year's rent despite having promised them they would not have to pay. BENNY has married a wealthy woman and wants to build a cyber-studio in the vacant lot next to ROGER and MARK's building, but MAUREEN has staged a protest to protect the homeless and to prevent building in the vacant lot she uses as a performance space. MARK and MIMI fall deeply in love after each discovers that the other has AIDS, although MIMI is tempted by her drug pusher. TOM and ANGEL grow closer and

dream about moving to Santa Fe to open a restaurant. MAUREEN stages her protest, encouraging the whole cast and audience not to rely so heavily on modern technology, instead hoping they will all take a "leap of faith" ("Over the Moon"). The police come and clear out the lot, pad-locking ROGER and MARK's door as they go.

Act Two opens during next New Year's eve celebrations, when BENNY concedes the rent to MARK and ROGER, on the condition that MARK film his benevolent gestures and get the footage on television. BENNY implies to ROGER that MIMI had sex with him and that is what changed his mind about the rent. ANGEL dies from complications from AIDS, leaving TOM in mourning. The other characters mourn as well, but in different ways. ROGER sells his belongings and buys a car so he can move to Santa Fe, and MIMI leaves. Before ROGER can leave, MAUREEN finds MIMI rather ill. She brings MIMI to MARK and ROGER's apartment, where MIMI dies briefly, but comes back to life. She claims that ANGEL had come to her, telling her to go back to ROGER. The cast is reunited, with the spirit of ANGEL as the force causing them to take the "leap of faith."

POZ magazine's assertion that Rent overlooks AIDS is overstated. The production features more characters who are

HIV-positive or have full-blown AIDS than any other production in history, and the characters with AIDS reflect the actual demographics of those who are most often afflicted with the malady: minorities, especially Blacks and Hispanics; homosexual men; and IV drug users. Also, the main characters are an infected heterosexual couple: MIMI is a Latina IV-drug user, and ROGER is a former junkie who acquired AIDS presumably from his previous girlfriend April, who committed suicide because they had AIDS ("Tune Up #3"). POZ discounts Rent's enactment of other AIDS-specific moments as well, including an AIDS support group meeting, an AIDS memorial, and many incidental references either in song, in recitative, on the set, or on the costumes themselves (emblazoned across the lapel of ROGER's jacket are the words "Only the good die young"). POZ goes on to speculate that AIDS is overlooked in Rent because "[i]n Rent AIDS isn't a metaphor for the end of the century, the end of the world, the end of anything. AIDS just is. It's not pitied, it's not pampered, and it's not ignored" (qtd. in Roman 272).

The implication that POZ expects persons with AIDS to be pitied and pampered is contradictory to what one might expect a periodical designed to encourage and uplift PWAs

should want. Still, to some degree, POZ is correct. In spite of the unprecedented number of AIDS-infected characters, Rent portrays AIDS as just a part of the struggle to exist at the end of the millennium. AIDS is no more or less a hurdle to jump than being poor or a drug addict or losing performance spaces.

The ubiquitousness of AIDS in Rent reflects the Zeitgeist of the late 1990's. Douglas Crimp calls this phenomenon "the normalization of AIDS," because it is no longer urgent; rather, it has become "merely a permanent disaster" (qtd. in Roman 274-75), along with crime, drug abuse, and poverty, all of which are issues the characters in Rent must survive. David Roman modifies Crimp's term, calling the phenomenon the "banalization of AIDS," stripping the term of its stricture to government indifference in favor of the apathy of the culture at large. He writes,

The banality of AIDS strips the epidemic of its political and personal emergency; it shifts the drama inherent in all experiences of AIDS, regardless of status, from the deadly serious to the almost trivial. AIDS is represented as trend, as fashion, as style. (275)

Roman's contention is supported by the musical number "La Vie Boheme," in which the cast sings in toast

To days of inspiration, playing hookey, making something out of nothing. . . . to riding your bike, midday past the three piece suits, to fruits, to no absolutes, to absolute, to choice, to the Village Voice, to any passing fad, to being an us for once instead of a them. . . . To hand-crafted beers made in local breweries, to yoga, to yogurt, to rice and beans and cheese, to leather, to dildos, to curry vindaloo.

The list continues throughout this song and picks up in a reprise, with "to people living with, living with, living with not dying from disease" ("La Vie Boheme"). Enumerated as part of a long list of indifferent topics are people with AIDS. AIDS has become, finally, another life issue.

Newsweek theater reviewer Jack Kroll opened his May 13, 1996 review of Rent focusing on one pivotal scene in the musical. During the bridge between "La Vie Boheme" and the love ballad, "I Should Tell You," both ROGER and MIMI's beepers go off. Both characters pull out bottles of pills, and MIMI unconcernedly announces, "AZT break" ("La Vie Boheme"). Kroll writes, "[S]uddenly they realize that they're both HIV-positive. Clinch. Love duet" (56). Kroll calls this moment "the quintessential romantic moment of the '90s" (56). This bridge leads to "I Should Tell You," a love

ballad that is as much about the characters' anxiety to disclose their serostatus as it is about their anxiety to admit their love for one another. This potential means of introducing educative material is undermined by the two characters' cavalierly popping the pills into each others' mouths, "as a kind of hip ritual of the initiated" (Roman 277), another example of what Roman calls banalization.

The "initiated" are, however, the American culture at large. American television shows such as Ellen, Will & Grace, St. Elsewhere, and ER feature or featured characters who are gay or have AIDS. Recent film versions of Love! Valour! Compassion! and Jeffrey, along with the Academy Award-winning Philadelphia (which starred popular actors Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas) about an attorney with AIDS, have brought AIDS to the American public, educating them about the causes, treatments, and effects of the syndrome. AIDS art, including paintings, sculptures, and the well-known AIDS Quilt, bring attention to the syndrome, and the election of gay-friendly Bill Clinton as President of the United States has encouraged more than just tolerance of persons with AIDS. Americans at the turn of the millennium are a community generally informed about AZT and safer sex.

Jim Nicola, the artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop in the East Village where Rent was

developed, explains the importance of community in Rent:

Like La Boheme, [Rent] centered on Roger and Mimi surrounded by subplots. We thought it would more interesting - and democratic - to see the struggle of community. Mimi and Roger are still the main lovers, but we brought the other love stories up front. The challenge was to make a community of people the protagonist of the play. . . . Rent would not have emerged without the seeds in this soil. The sense of a community-of-artists as a healing force is our theme. And it became the play's theme. (qtd. in Roman 279)

In Rent, AIDS is not an individual's problem. It is the problem of the community living in the East Village, it is the problem of the community living in New York, and it is the problem of the American and world community. AIDS is not "normal" or "banal." AIDS *is*, and there is no cure for it. The only "cure" for AIDS is to stop the disengagement from life individuals with it suffer. Sometime in the future, AIDS will be cured medically; until then, the only hope is for Americans and citizens of the world to rid themselves of the fear of AIDS.

When ROGER plans to leave for Santa Fe, MIMI leaves her friends and tries to survive on her own. Before going, she

sings to ROGER one of the pivotal lines in the musical:
 "Goodbye love, goodbye love, came to say goodbye, love,
 goodbye. Just came to say goodbye love, goodbye love . . .
 hello disease" ("Goodbye Love"). When MIMI leaves her
 community of friends, she succumbs to AIDS.

MAUREEN brings the cold and wet MIMI back to MARK and
 ROGER's apartment at the end of Rent. MIMI miraculously
 recuperates, claiming that she saw ANGEL, who had died of
 AIDS earlier. MIMI tells her friends, including her lover
 ROGER, that from beyond the grave ANGEL had told her to take
 a "leap of faith" and be with ROGER. She is to be a part of
 the community that cares for and loves each other.

Rent closes with the entire company singing. The women
 sing,

I can't control my destiny. I trust my soul. My
 only goal is just to be. Without you the hand
 gropes, the ear hears, the pulse beats. Life goes
 on, but I'm gone cause I die without you.

("Finale")

The women express that, although they are alive, their lives
 are barren without the person or people who have passed
 away. This is particularly directed at the character of
 ANGEL, but the cast turns toward the audience, implying that
 the audience is as much a part of the community as the

actors on the stage are, and as the characters they portray are.

Meanwhile, the men sing,

Will I lose my dignity? Will someone care? Will I
wake tomorrow from this nightmare? There's only
now, there's only here. Give in to love or live in
fear. No other path, no other way, no day but
today. ("Finale")

This last refrain reinforces what PWAs and their loved ones fear most, abandonment. Only love, not mere tolerance, can overcome this mortal fear. The men also turn to the audience, involving them in the plea for compassion and both asking them to have and giving them courage to become part of a community.

The last lines of the play are sung by the entire cast: "No day but today" ("Finale"). This final line, sung directly to the audience, is a plea for action, reinforcing the lines the women and men sang earlier. It implores the audience to become active in loving everyone, regardless of serostatus or socio-economic background or ethnic heritage. While the last lines of the play, and indeed many of Rent's songs, may seem drenched in bathos, they nonetheless carry meaning in the age of AIDS.

Conclusion

POZ magazine's contradictory claim that Rent both overlooks AIDS and features an unprecedented number AIDS-infected characters is indicative of the general American population's ambivalence towards the syndrome. People are certainly more educated about AIDS today than they were when Larry Kramer began writing The Normal Heart five years into the plague, and generally people are more supportive of people with AIDS. Still, most Americans are unsure about what to expect or what to do when they meet PWAs. What they really want is for it all to just go away, but it will not.

POZ, like so many people and organizations who support AIDS causes and care deeply for persons with AIDS, seems to be caught in a catch-22: Rent is neither a play about living with AIDS because that seems to negate the crusade for a cure to the syndrome, nor does it feature the quest for a cure instead of the living-with-AIDS theme. POZ expects Larson's production to handle characters with AIDS with kid gloves, yet at the same time the magazine wants to see a socially and politically conscientious production about how to live with AIDS.

For centuries, socially and politically aware dramatists have used their art as a means of spurring

audiences to action or convincing them to believe in a certain way. Ancient Greek plays were infused with social and political satire. Aristophanes's (450-388 BCE) comedic war between the sexes, a social problem in Lysistrata, complicates the political wars between Athens and Sparta. His purpose was to expose the serious inequality between genders and to criticize the Peloponnesian War.

The medieval miracle, mystery, and morality plays (c. 1000-1300) were designed both to celebrate the coming of Christ at Easter and to instruct playgoers in correct moral thinking. The plays of Shakespeare (1564?-1616), especially the histories and tragedies, center on political history and psychological intrigue, and they teach both the Renaissance playgoer and the modern reader how to succeed in the world as it recreates itself politically. Othello, for instance, opposes the title character's naive faith in Aristotelian "Truth" as explained in Book Eight of the Nicomachean Ethics and his lieutenant Iago's Machiavellian desire to best his superior.

From the beginning of his dramatic career, Victorian playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) used his sharp wit and polemical ability to emphasize social and economic issues rather than romance in his plays. Mrs. Warren's Profession (1899), Caesar and Cleopatra (1901), and Saint

Joan (1924) all question the role of women in Victorian and Edwardian society, while Heartbreak House (1919) exposed to the playgoer the spiritual bankruptcy of the generation responsible for World War I.

Along with Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets and a host of other playwrights, including those represented in this study, understood the social and political issues of their day and created impassioned works that encouraged change.

In the past twenty years, the way Americans have understood and perceived AIDS has evolved considerably, from seeing the syndrome as a self-inflicted punishment for immorality and treating AIDS sufferers as pariah, to realizing that AIDS affects every American and world citizen and understanding that people with AIDS - regardless of gender orientation - need and deserve concerned, nurturing support. The American dramas discussed in this study record and sometimes advance this evolution similarly to the way the theater and art in general are used as means to encourage political or social action.

Plays that encourage people with AIDS to live fully, plays that educate more people about AIDS, and plays that press researchers to find a cure will surely continue to be

written. Their popularity and success may well depend upon the American people's willingness not just to tolerate the homosexual community, but to welcome and embrace it. No matter what progress has been made in the search for treatments and a cure for AIDS, much of it is because the homosexual community - gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people - supports AIDS research and uses its talents to educate the American public about the syndrome.

NOTES

¹ Rent follows the tradition of Hair (1967), which depicts hippies, and A Chorus Line (1975), which depicts blue-collar gypsy dancers, by portraying another group of Americans who are marginalized, persons with AIDS (Kroll 58).

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